DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 475 875 UD 035 613

AUTHOR	Togneri, Wendy; Anderson, Stephen E.
TITLE	Beyond Islands of Excellence: What Districts Can Do To Improve Instruction and Achievement in All Schools. A Project of the Learning First Alliance [and] A Leadership Brief.
INSTITUTION	Learning First Alliance, Washington, DC.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	2003-03-00
NOTE	104p.
CONTRACT	R215U000007-01
AVAILABLE FROM	Learning First Alliance, 1001 Connecticut Avenue, N.W. Suite 335, Washington, DC 20036 ($10). Tel: 202-296-5220; Fax: 202-296-3246; Web site: http://www.learningfirst.org.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Evaluative (142)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC05 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Academic Achievement; Change Strategies; Disadvantaged Youth; Educational Change; *Educational Improvement; Elementary Secondary Education; *Excellence in Education; *Faculty Development; *Instructional Leadership; Limited English Speaking; Minority Group Children; *Poverty; Teacher Improvement; Urban Schools
IDENTIFIERS	*Systemic Change

ABSTRACT

This study, based on an examination of five improving high-poverty school districts, identified key factors to improving instruction across entire school systems. All of the participating districts had seen a rise in poverty over a decade, had experienced significant changes in ethnic and racial makeup, and had seen increases in the percentage of English as a Second Language students. All of the districts had also demonstrated improvement in academic achievement as measured by test scores across grades, subjects, and racial/ethnic makeup. Researchers visited each district twice during the academic year 2001-2002, collecting data via interviews and focus groups with education stakeholders, observations of professional development efforts, examination of documents, and field notes. Seven factors emerged as essential to improvement: acknowledging poor performance and seeking solutions; using a systemwide approach to improving instruction; instilling visions that focused on student learning and guided instructional improvement; making decisions based on data, not instinct; adopting new approaches to professional development that involved a coherent, district-organized set of strategies to improve instruction; redefining leadership roles; and committing to sustaining reform over the long haul. Two appendices contain research methodology and district achievement data. Included is a leadership brief that summarizes findings and recommendations. (SM)

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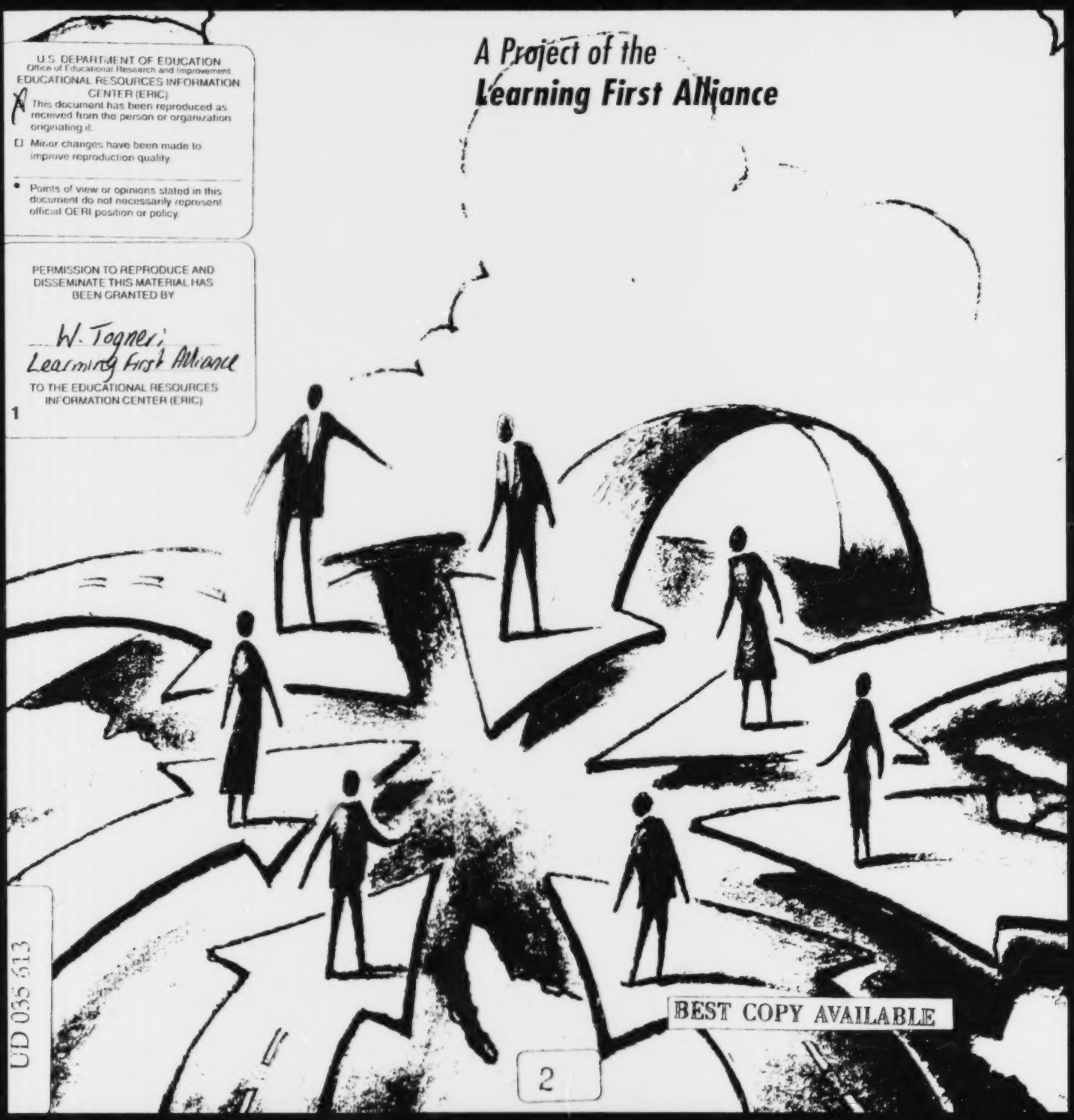

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Development and production of this report were supported by grants from the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation and from the Office of Educational Research & Improvement, U.S. Department of Education. The findings and conclusions presented in this report do not necessarily represent the official positions or policies of the Office of Educational Research & Improvement, U.S. Department of Education (grant no. R215U000007-01) or the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation.

LEARNING **FIRST** ALLIANCE

BEYOND ISLANDS OF EXCELLENCE:

What Districts Can Do to Improve Instruction and Achievement in All Schools—A Leadership Brief

A Project of the
Learning First Alliance

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Printed in the United States of America.

Acknowledgments

Space unfortunately does not permit the Alliance to thank by name the many staff members of our study districts or to outline the depth of their contributions. Many staff members in each district gave generously of their time and expertise. We offer deep appreciation to Wanda Bamberg and Nadine Kujawa of Aldine Independent School District; to Jon Baker, Lorraine Costella, and Bonnie Ward of the Kent County Public Schools; to Lowell Billings, Dennis Doyle, and Libby Gil of Chula Vista Elementary School District; to Ginny Craig, Carol Johnson, and Rick Spicuzza of the Minneapolis Public Schools; and to Melody Johnson, Diana Lam, and Mike Sorum of the Providence Public Schools.

Many people from the research and policy community generously and voluntarily gave of their time and expertise. We thank Kermit Buckner, Gordon Cawelti, Tom Corcoran, Betty Hale, Rick Hess, Stephanie Hirsh, Ellen Foley, Susan Fuhrman, Willis Hawley, Susan Moore Johnson, Dale Kalkofen, Bruce King, Michael Knapp, Diane Massell, Lauren Resnick, Linda Skrla, Sam Stringfield, Gary Sykes, and Michael Usdan. We also thank the members of the Learning First State Alliances who contributed their time and suggestions to this study.

This study would not have been possible without the guidance and hard work of the International Centre for Educational Change at the University of Toronto's Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE). We are deeply grateful to the OISE research team: Stephen Anderson, who helped shepherd this study from infancy to completion, and Shawn Moore and Nancy Watson, who provided extensive guidance. We also thank Nina Bascia, Amanda Datnow, and Andy Hargreaves of the University of Toronto for their important contributions to this report.

This study represents several years of work by many people affiliated with the Learning First Alliance. We thank staff members of Alliance organizations who contributed to the research design, data gathering, and drafting of this report, including Diane Airhart, Michael Allen, Agnes Crawford, Gail Dickson, Richard Flanary, Twanna Hill, Julia Lara, John Mitchell, Joyce Munro, Virginia Roach, Marilyn Schlief, Sylvia Seidel, Joan Snowden, Irina Terehoff, Adria Thomas, and Ann R. Walker. We would also like to thank several board members from Alliance organizations, including Mary Barter, Darrell Rud, and Mossi White. We are especially grateful to Gene Carter, Tony Rollins, Judy Seltz, and Mikki Terry for their guidance and support.

We wish to thank members of the Learning First Alliance staff and the team of editors. We offer our deepest gratitude to Ann Walker, whose perseverance contributed immeasurably to the completion of this study. The careful editing of Anne Edwards, Pat George, and Bob Rothman contributed significantly to creating what we hope is a clear and engaging report. We thank Cathy Horn for her thorough review of the achievement data. We also extend appreciation to Abby Emerson, Adrienne Gault, Marissa Hopkins, Lisa Lazarus, and Jennifer Oliva for their important contributions to the project and its completion.

Finally, we are grateful to the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Research & Improvement and the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation.

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I. Introduction

Heroic principals who turn around low-performing schools, innovative charter schools that break established molds, inspiring teachers who motivate students to excel—those are the familiar prescriptions for improving student achievement in high-poverty schools. While such efforts may mean brighter educational futures for the children involved, they produce isolated islands of excellence.

Our nation has a moral imperative to close the achievement gap between low-income students and their more advantaged peers. The No Child Left Behind Act makes this a legal requirement as well. Yet improving learning opportunities for all children will require more than individual talents or school-by-school efforts. It will demand systemwide approaches that touch every child in every school in every district across the nation.

The Learning First Alliance calls for policymakers, practitioners, and the public to accept the challenge of improving student achievement across entire school systems. We believe that substantial gains will result only if we recognize that to increase student achievement, we must improve instruction and commit the political will and resources necessary to develop districtwide solutions. As a permanent partnership of organizations representing parents, teachers, principals, administrators, local and state boards of education, and colleges of education, the Learning First Alliance recognizes that such improvements will require both individual and collective action. Without efforts to create success across school systems, far too many students will continue to languish. We find that unacceptable.

Moving beyond islands of excellent schools to systems of success will require that all those involved in education better understand what they must do to help students succeed. State leaders need greater knowledge about where to target resources and how to set policies to support entire school systems. District-level educators—board members, superintendents, union leaders, principals, and teachers—need guidance about policies and practices that will improve instruction. And community members and parents need good ideas about how to most effectively participate in, and support, high-quality teaching and learning.

The Study and Its Purpose

To address the need for better information, the Learning First Alliance studied five high-poverty districts making strides in improving student achievement. Recognizing that effective instruction is crucial to improving achievement, we were interested in learning more about how districts promoted good instruction across their systems. Furthermore, in keeping with the mission of the Learning First Alliance, we started from the premise that many actors play important roles in improving instruction and achievement. Given these premises, we sought to address the following questions:

- How did the districts create the will to begin instructional reform?
- What strategies guided their reform efforts?
- In what ways did districts change their approaches to professional development?
- How did interactions among the stakeholders facilitate or hinder instructional reform?

- How was leadership distributed across stakeholders to facilitate improvement?

The Districts

To find answers to these questions, this study examined instruction and achievement in five school districts across the country:

- Aldine Independent School District, Texas
- Chula Vista Elementary School District, California
- Kent County Public Schools, Maryland
- Minneapolis Public Schools, Minnesota
- Providence Public Schools, Rhode Island

To select the districts, we used both primary and secondary criteria. In applying our primary criteria we sought districts that exhibited all of the following characteristics:

- Success in increasing student achievement in math and/or reading over three or more years
- Improvement in student achievement across grade levels, races, and ethnicities
- A poverty rate of at least 25 percent, as defined by students eligible for free or reduced lunch
- A reputation for effective professional development practices, based on recommendations from education leaders

To identify the districts, we solicited recommendations from Learning First Alliance member organizations, education researchers, and nonprofit leaders. We received over 50 recommendations. To narrow the field, we conducted a careful review of district achievement data, using standardized test results from 1998–2000 as the primary data source. On the basis of primary data, 14 districts emerged as potential study sites. We then applied secondary criteria by reviewing a mix of demographic factors, including size, geographic distribution, urbanicity, and union affiliation. We also sought districts whose current districtwide reforms had not already been studied. As a final measure, we interviewed superintendents and staff development leaders to learn more about their professional development work.[1] After applying all criteria, we selected the five districts listed here.

The selected districts varied in some important ways (see Table 1). They included a small rural district of fewer than 3,000 pupils (Kent County) and large urban districts of more than 45,000 students (Aldine and Minneapolis). The annual expenditures of the districts ranged from Aldine's $6,822 per pupil to the $10,854 per pupil that Minneapolis spent. The percentage of children in poverty ranged from 38 percent in Kent County to 80 percent in Providence. The districts also shared some important demographic characteristics. All saw a rise in poverty over the past decade, and all experienced a significant change in the ethnic and racial makeup of their populations. Most shifted from predominantly white communities to communities of increasing diversity, and many of the districts saw a dramatic rise in overall student population. The districts also saw an increase in the percentage of students for whom English was a second language.

Taken as a whole, the five districts demonstrated improvement in academic achievement—as measured by test scores—across grades, subjects, and racial/ethnic groups. In Aldine, the achievement gap between white and black students who took the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) math test closed signif-

[1] See Appendix I for a complete explanation of the study methodology.

icantly. In 1994, 65 percent of black students met minimum expectations compared with 84 percent of whites. By 2002, the percentage of black students meeting minimum expectations had risen to 94 percent, while the number for white students rose to 96 percent. Kent County, meanwhile, increased the proportion of students scoring "satisfactory" on state tests and was the highest-scoring district in the state in 1999 and 2000. Increases in achievement also were evident in the other districts.[2] For example, the percentage of fifth-grade black students in Minneapolis passing the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment of Reading rose from 14 percent in 1998 to 33 percent in 2002. Chula Vista experienced similar gains. In 1999, the percentage of second-grade Hispanic students scoring at or above the 50th percentile on the state-sanctioned Stanford 9 math test was 37. By 2002, 55 percent of second-grade Hispanic students were rated at or above the 50th percentile. In Providence, the percentage of fourth-grade students who met or exceeded the standard on the New Standards English Language Arts Reference Exam rose 12 percent from 1998 to 2002. (See Appendix II for detailed information about student achievement results for each district.)

In general, test scores in the five districts reflected both the successes and the challenges of reform. For example, elementary students generally made steady progress, while students in the higher grades demonstrated more volatile performance. Where districts had chosen a particular subject area (e.g., reading) on which to focus initially, gains were more readily seen on the associated test. In addition, while all racial and ethnic groups made progress, it occurred at different rates. The gap between white and minority students closed at varying rates as well. Finally, districts that had implemented reform efforts over longer periods of time showed clearer improvement than did the districts in which reform was a newer endeavor, such as Providence. Overall, the data revealed that although the districts had not experienced complete success, they had made districtwide gains—particularly at the elementary level—in improving student achievement.

[2] The trends must be considered with two caveats. First, in some cases, because certain subgroup populations (e.g., Native American students) were so small, data were not provided. Second, the data do not follow cohorts of students but rather track trends over time across groups.

Table 1. District Statistical Data: 2001–2002 School Year

	Aldine	Chula Vista	Kent County	Minneapolis	Providence
Total budget ($)	391,362,709	182,325,535	21,828,714	664,480,530	254,492,680
Per pupil budget ($)	6,822	5,500	8,000	10,854	9,897
Number of schools	61	39	8	128	48
Number of students	52,520	23,132	2,795	47,470	27,192
Student racial/ethnic distribution (%)					
White	9	20	70	26	17
Black	34	5	27	44	22
Hispanic	55	62	3	11	52
Asian/Pacific Islander/ Filipino	3	12	0	15	3
Native American/ Alaskan Native	0	1	0	4	1
Free and reduced lunch eligibility (%)	74	44	38	67	80
English as a second language (%)	23	33	1	24	22
Number of teachers (full-time equivalent)	3,496	1,122	179	3,629	2,100
Average salary ($)	43,732	48,644	50,240	49,190	NA
Average years of teaching experience	11	14	17	11	NA
Current and previous superintendents	Nadine Kujawa (2001–present); Sonny Donaldson (1986–2001)	Lowell Billings (2002–present); Libby Gil (1993–2002)	Bonnie Ward (2002–present); Lorraine Costella (1994–2002)	Carol Johnson (1997–present); Peter Hutchinson (1993–1997)	Melody Johnson (2002–present); Diana Lam (1999–2002)
School board	7-member board elected at large	5-member board elected at large	5-member board elected at large	7-member board elected at large	9-member appointed board

Notes: NA = not applicable. Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding error.

The Findings

Learning First Alliance leaders and researchers spent several days in each district and conducted more than 200 individual interviews, 15 school visits, and 60 focus groups. We found that districts implemented a strikingly similar set of strategies to improve instruction. Seven factors emerged as essential to improvement:

1. Districts had the courage to acknowledge poor performance and the will to seek solutions.

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2. Districts put in place a systemwide approach to improving instruction—one that articulated curricular content and provided instructional supports.
3. Districts instilled visions that focused on student learning and guided instructional improvement.[3]
4. Districts made decisions based on data, not instinct.
5. Districts adopted new approaches to professional development that involved a coherent and district-organized set of strategies to improve instruction.
6. Districts redefined leadership roles.
7. Districts committed to sustaining reform over the long haul.

Below is a brief overview of each finding. Later in the report, we discuss these findings in more detail.

FINDING 1: Districts had the courage to acknowledge poor performance and the will to seek solutions.

The emergence of public reporting of testing results drove many districts to look at student achievement data in new ways, and they did not like what they saw: low achievement, particularly for poor and minority children. In each district, some combination of leaders—school board members, superintendents, and/or community members—acknowledged poor performance, accepted responsibility, and began seeking solutions.

That courage to acknowledge negative information was critical to building the will to change. Leaders said that in the past they had assumed that their systems were effective and that all participants were doing the best they could. Today, the willingness of leaders to question practices publicly has spurred stakeholders at all levels to implement and support new strategies to improve teaching and learning.

FINDING 2: Districts put in place a systemwide approach to improving instruction.

To improve student achievement, leaders realized they would need to fundamentally change instructional practice. Teachers would need to be more effective in helping every child succeed, and principals, central office staff, and board members would need to better support teachers in their classrooms.

Before reforms began, the districts had neither clear, well-understood goals nor effective measures of progress. Supports to improve instruction were haphazard. Today, much has changed. The most common components of these new systems are:

- A vision focused on student learning and instructional improvement
- Systemwide curricula that connect to state standards, are coherent across grade levels, and provide teachers with clear expectations about what to teach
- A multimeasure accountability system and systemwide use of data to inform practice, to hold schools accountable for results, and to monitor progress
- A new approach to professional development—one that involves a coherent and district-organized set of strategies to improve instruction
- Instructional leadership distributed across stakeholders
- Strategic allocation of financial and human resources

[3] Items 3–6 are core elements of finding 2, the systemwide approach. We have chosen to highlight these findings separately because of their importance in district efforts to improve instruction.

- Use of high-quality research to inform decisionmaking and practice

FINDING 3: Districts instilled visions that focused on student learning and guided instructional improvement.

Acknowledging poor student performance provided district leaders with the ammunition to push for change. The districts began by developing visions to guide them down this path. The visions, while differing across the districts, shared four common elements:

1. Increasing achievement for all students
2. Improving instruction
3. Creating a safe and supportive environment for students
4. Involving parents and the community

What distinguished these districts was not the existence of a student-focused vision but the extent to which—and the ways in which—the districts used their visions to guide instructional improvement. Visions were clearly outlined in strategic plans, board meeting agendas, school improvement plans, and newsletters. Furthermore, superintendents made it clear that the vision was to drive programmatic and financial decisions at every level of the system. Most districts succeeded in embedding the vision into the actions of stakeholders, particularly at the administrative level.

FINDING 4: Districts made decisions based on data, not instinct.

Leaders determined that to improve instruction, they would need to put in place systems to assess district strengths and weaknesses. Therefore, the districts did three things:

1. They systematically gathered data on multiple issues, such as student and school performance, customer satisfaction, and demographic indicators.
2. They developed multimeasure accountability systems to gauge student and school progress.
3. They encouraged teachers and administrators to use data to guide decisionmaking.

As a result of these actions, principals, board members, teachers, and central office staff in all districts exhibited significant use of data to guide decisionmaking.

FINDING 5: Districts adopted new approaches to professional development.

The districts made remarkable shifts in their approaches to professional development. To varying degrees, they all rejected the traditional, one-time workshop approach to developing their teachers' skills. Instead, they implemented coherent, district-organized strategies to improve instruction. The strategies included the following:

- *Principles for professional development.* Districts used research-based principles of professional development to guide their work. They connected teacher and principal professional development to district goals and student needs; based the content of professional development on needs that emerged from data; and implemented multiple strategies to foster continuous learning.
- *Networks of instructional experts.* Districts sought to augment instructional leadership by building well-trained cadres of instructional experts among the teacher and principal corps. Principals were not expected to lead schools by themselves, and teachers were not expected to work in isolation. By creating networks of instructional experts, including instructionally proficient principals and teacher leaders (e.g., content specialists, mentor teachers), districts increased

their leadership capacity to assist teachers in improving practice.

- *Support systems for new teachers.* Districts implemented multiple strategies to assist beginning teachers. In most districts, mentoring programs provided the main support, but many also included a series of seminars and other assistance.
- *Strategic allocation of financial resources.* Districts invested financially in their goals of improving instruction and achievement. Before allocating their dollars, school boards, superintendents, and principals looked carefully at how to stretch and prioritize their funds to address instructional needs.
- *Encouragement and assistance in using data.* Districts provided teachers and principals with better data—and with more assistance in how to use them to guide instructional practice.

FINDING 6: Districts redefined leadership roles.

District leaders determined that no single group would be expected to tackle instructional improvement alone. Instead, they redistributed leadership roles. Over time, the districts extended leadership from traditional positions—superintendents and principals—to include other actors: assistant principals, teacher leaders, central office staff, union leaders, and school board members. In addition, most districts included representatives from universities, state offices, and communities in their leadership efforts. Leadership in the districts was not merely shared; most stakeholder groups sought to take on the elements of reform that they were best positioned to lead.

- *School boards shepherded instructional improvement efforts.* In many districts it was the courage of the school board that jump-started reform efforts. Yet the boards did not simply galvanize change; they followed through by promulgating policies that supported instructional improvement (e.g., higher salaries for teachers and principals, mentoring programs for new teachers, and systemwide curriculum). In most districts, the boards held the superintendent and staff accountable for progress but did not engage in the daily administration of the reform effort.
- *Central offices drove systemwide change.* Superintendents used central office policies, structures, and human resources to guide instructional improvement. In most of the districts, central offices assumed roles that they were uniquely situated to fulfill—responsibilities that, if not taken up by districts, would have been left unperformed or highly fragmented. Examples of such practices included establishing strong principal training and support systems, coordinating the development of districtwide curriculum, establishing and implementing multimeasure accountability systems, and creating systemwide supports for new teachers.
- *Principals and teacher leaders were crucial to the districts' systems of instructional leadership.* Nowhere was the district commitment to building instructional expertise more evident than in the development of principals and teacher leaders. Districts expected principals to act as the primary instructional leaders at the school sites and provided significant support to help reach this ideal. Some districts required training in observing classrooms, providing instructional feedback, and using data. All districts regularly convened principals to share challenges, exchange strategies, and learn about emerging issues. Today principals regularly engage in classroom observation, use data to analyze student performance and teaching strategies, and seek to build structures that encourage collaboration.

To expand instructional leadership, districts also relied on teacher leaders. In each district, these individuals provided additional instructional support to teachers by modeling lessons in the classroom, assisting struggling teachers, and providing materials and ideas. Furthermore, they relieved principals of administrative duties related to instruction, such as professional development planning and overseeing test administration. In Aldine, for example, most schools used teacher leaders to analyze data and to explain the analyses to teachers. As a result, teachers had a better sense of student performance and more information on which to base instructional adjustments.

Teacher leader networks also deepened the coherence of instructional practice among schools within the districts. Districts frequently convened teacher leaders for professional development and information sharing. As a result, those individuals were intimately engaged in districtwide planning and were able to incorporate new strategies into classrooms.

FINDING 7: Districts committed to sustaining reform over the long haul.

The districts in our study understood that making a difference takes time. They set their courses and stayed with them for years. They also experienced remarkable stability in their leadership. In three of the five districts, the superintendents who sparked change served their districts for at least eight years.[4] In addition, in most districts many board members served for 10 or more years. That continuity allowed superintendents and boards to grow together in their approaches to change and to better understand each other's work.

Even when superintendents left the districts, the boards chose to hire from within in order to maintain continuity. In four of the five districts, the superintendent changed during the course of this study and was replaced by a deputy superintendent, usually one who had been responsible for curriculum and instruction.[5] The original superintendents had served to shake up district practice. After their departure, the boards sought to sustain the reforms through continued stability in leadership.

Challenges That Remain

While the story is largely one of forward momentum, a few caveats are in order. First, although the districts demonstrated improvements, not all were high achieving. Two districts, Kent County and Aldine, registered scores in the top tier of their states; the remaining districts experienced improvement at the elementary grades in math and/or reading. Second, while not all districts exhibited each characteristic we describe, at least three districts implemented each of the strategies we outline in this report. Finally, while our study concentrated on district efforts to improve instruction, the districts employed additional strategies (e.g., family support systems) that may have contributed to academic success but were beyond the scope of this study.

[4] In Kent County, Lorraine Costella served as superintendent for eight years before retiring in 2002. Libby Gil spearheaded Chula Vista for nine years before stepping down in 2002. Before retiring in 2001, Sonny Donaldson had been Aldine's superintendent for 15 years. His deputy, Nadine Kujawa, who has worked in Aldine for more than 30 years, became superintendent after his departure.

[5] Providence's superintendent, Diana Lam, left her post in September 2002 to become deputy chancellor for teaching and learning for the New York City Department of Education. She was replaced by her deputy, Melody Johnson. In Kent County, Lorraine Costella was replaced by her assistant superintendent for instruction, Bonnie Ward. In Chula Vista, Lowell Billings, a former Chula Vista assistant superintendent for both curriculum and finance, replaced Libby Gil. As noted above, in Aldine Nadine Kujawa replaced Sonny Donaldson.

Although the districts in the study have made significant strides toward their goals, they still face considerable challenges. We will address three challenges in a final section of this report.

* * *

We do not presume that the study districts have all the answers. Those we interviewed were candid about the challenges they face and about problems that impede their ability to make even greater progress. Nonetheless, we believe that this report will contribute to reform efforts in other districts by highlighting policies and practices to improve teaching and learning across entire systems.

II. Building the Will and Vision for Districtwide Instructional Reform

Why were these districts willing to tackle reform? What distinguished them from other districts that operated under similar policy contexts and experienced similar challenges? The answer is the presence of key leaders who were willing to accept ownership of difficult challenges and seek solutions without placing blame. The leaders varied by district—school board members, superintendents, community leaders. But in each district, one or more leaders pushed their colleagues to do something about the poor performance that state and local test data revealed.

The emergence of public reporting of testing results drove many districts to look at student achievement data in new ways, and they did not like what they saw: low achievement, particularly for poor and minority children. The courage to accept this negative information was critical in building the will to change. In the past, district leaders had questioned neither their own practices nor the achievement of their students. Today, the study districts do not ignore disappointing data; instead, they use public accountability to spur stakeholders to support new approaches to improving practice.

The districts created the will for reform in different ways. In Kent County and Aldine, the motivating factor was pressure to improve the state test scores of poor and minority children. District leaders were dissatisfied with low student achievement and demanded change. In fact, these leaders demonstrated precisely what advocates of standardized testing had hoped: the data focused attention on student performance and encouraged educators to address their responsibilities to improve achievement. The story in Aldine illustrates how the confluence of leadership and state tests can galvanize change. Prior to the implementation of the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS), district administrators had not looked at student achievement in an organized way. They simply thought that students were performing well. Yet the TAAS results of the early 1990s belied that belief: Aldine, in fact, ranked near the bottom of the state. Data revealed substantial gaps in achievement: although white students scored relatively well, black and Hispanic students scored much lower. Concerned about low levels of achievement, the superintendent and school board determined that a dramatically new approach to teaching and learning was needed. Noted previous superintendent Sonny Donaldson in 1999:

> [Eight to ten years ago] we didn't have the data that showed that not everybody was performing at the level they're performing [at] today. We never disaggregated test scores ten years ago. We had a black valedictorian at Aldine High School....We had Hispanic kids that were just outstanding students and we would look at that and say, well, yeah, Hispanic kids are getting a fair shake in Aldine because we've got Hispanic kids that are doing great. But no they weren't, because we didn't look at the data. (Koschoreck, n.d.)

In Minneapolis, by contrast, reform efforts stemmed from a steady accumulation of troubling data, coupled with strong community pressure. In the mid-1990s, data revealed that the achievement gap between white and minority students was widening and that the high school graduation rate was scarcely above 40 percent. Community leaders expressed deep concern about student achievement and the equality of opportunity for all students. In response, the

municipal government, the business community, the school board, and community advocacy groups demanded that the district take action to improve performance. In perhaps the most dramatic action, the Minneapolis Chamber of Commerce refused to support the school board's request for a tax levy, contending that the performance data indicated that the district's spending was not producing adequate results. In response, the school board and the community hired a superintendent with a strong instructional background. Together the superintendent and other district and community leaders developed a set of performance indicators to rank and monitor school progress. The greater level of accountability reinstated trust among internal and external partners and contributed to local support, district innovations, and, eventually, new levy proposals.

In all districts, regardless of the catalyst, leaders came to the same conclusion: To improve student achievement, they needed to emphasize a key factor within their control—improving instruction.

Improving Instruction: A Systemwide Approach

Leaders realized that, in order to improve achievement, they would need to fundamentally change both instructional support and instructional practice. Teachers would need to be more effective in helping every child succeed, and principals, central office staff, and board members would need to support classroom efforts more effectively. To address these needs, districts sought the necessary infrastructure to support instructional improvement. This step represented a sharp break from past practice. Before current reform efforts, the districts lacked a universal understanding of expected outcomes. Some schools had common texts, but no districts had systemwide curricula. Boards did not make instruction and achievement central to their work. Principals were more likely to focus on the operations of the school than on the activities in the classroom. Teachers alone determined their curriculum and instructional methods. If they interacted with colleagues about instruction, they did so primarily in hallways and lunchrooms, not in regularly scheduled meetings. Without a common base on which to work, teachers and principals received fragmented guidance about instruction.

Today, much has changed. In general, districts are engaged in building systems in which the parts coalesce to collectively support instruction. While the components are not yet fully implemented, districts are making progress. The components of these new systems are:

- A vision focused on student learning and instructional improvement
- Systemwide curricula that connect to state standards, are coherent across grade levels, and provide teachers with clear expectations about what to teach
- A multimeasure accountability system and systemwide use of data to inform practice, to hold schools accountable for results, and to monitor progress
- A new approach to professional development—one that involves a coherent and district-organized set of strategies to improve instruction
- Instructional leadership distributed across stakeholders
- Strategic allocation of financial and human resources
- Use of high-quality research to inform decisionmaking and practice

These new systems have resulted in changes in practice. The vision of improving instruction

drives the work. Structures such as systemwide curricula and a multimeasure accountability system provide a path for improvement and signal expected outcomes. And a new approach to professional development has pushed teachers and administrators to use data and to assess and adjust instructional practice. Moreover, our data revealed that teachers and administrators are acting in new ways. More principals are instructional leaders, and more districts employ teacher leaders to assist principals and teachers with instructional needs. In the sections that follow, we examine these strategies in detail.

Strategic Visions Guide Instructional Reform

Four of the five districts began their reform efforts by reassessing and revising their visions. Over time, those visions became the guiding forces of all strategic planning. The existence of visions in these districts was not particularly unusual. What was notable, however, was the extent to which and the ways in which these districts used their visions to guide instructional improvement. We will explore the role of the vision below.

Vision Statements and Strategic Plans

In crafting their vision statements, districts generally developed both a *one-line vision* and a broader and written strategic plan. Each district's one-line vision connected to the goal of improving student achievement. Throughout the interviews, teachers, principals, board members, and central office staff wove the one-line vision about student achievement into the discussions: "all our students will achieve on grade level," "we must increase the achievement of all children in our district," and the like. Stakeholders had internalized the vision and spoke about it in their own words.

In addition to the one-line vision statements, each of the five districts had a more detailed set of goals and strategies that comprised the strategic plan. Four main goals emerged across the districts:

1. Increasing achievement for all students
2. Improving instruction
3. Creating a safe and supportive environment for students
4. Involving parents and the community

Although the districts' strategic plans were shaped in part according to those four goals, their specific strategies varied. For example, the strategic plans in Kent County, Minneapolis, and Providence contained both goals and the action steps necessary to achieve the goals. Kent County and Minneapolis added "indicators of success" so that they could gauge progress.

Box 1:
Excerpt from Kent County Strategic Plan

Kent County Strategic Plan—Goal 1: Kent County Public School students will demonstrate knowledge of basic skills and higher-order thinking skills to solve problems and communicate results.

- *Objective 2:* Kent County students will score at or above standard on state assessments.
- *Measure of progress:* Maryland School Performance Assessment Program (MSPAP, grades 3, 5, 8)
- *Indicator:* By July 2001, 70 percent of students will achieve satisfactory standards on MSPAP at grades 3, 5, and 8.
- Recommended steps to achieve the objectives:
  - Hold an assessment symposium in January to analyze student achievement on MSPAP assessments.
  - Use data to determine opportunities for improvement.
  - Schedule an evening informational meeting for parents to explain MSPAP test results and show prototype test items.
  - Monitor teacher use of newly developed curriculum frameworks for grades 4/5.

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Chula Vista, on the other hand, presented five strategic goals in conjunction with a set of shared values under which all members of the district were expected to operate. Furthermore, some plans evolved over time. For example, when Minneapolis determined that its initial plan was insufficient to guide its efforts to close the achievement gap, district leaders developed a supplemental strategic plan to focus specifically on minority students' achievement. Examples of the Kent County, Minneapolis, and Chula Vista approaches are outlined in Boxes 1–3.

Using the Vision to Guide Reform

Most districts had a written vision, but to bring that vision to life across multiple stakeholders was a rigorous task. To accomplish deep understanding and use of this vision, the districts used four primary strategies.

Building the Vision by Consensus

To craft their visions, districts sought the input of educators and community members. They convened community meetings, held focus groups, and issued surveys to learn more about stakeholder goals for their children. They then crafted vision statements that reflected the input (see Box 4). In Chula Vista, for example, the superintendent and her cabinet of assistant superintendents spent a full year conducting 18 focus groups with a myriad of stakeholders, including parents who lived in the district but sent their children to private schools. Seeking stakeholder input in a structured way was a substantial strategy for building broad ownership of the vision.

Making the Vision Visible

In these districts, the power of the vision was in its use. The vision was written into high-profile documents that were widely disseminated, such as strategic plans, board meeting agendas, school improvement plans, and parent newsletters. Perhaps because it was seen and heard in so many formats, the vision guided the thoughts and actions of most stakeholders and became a part of daily decisionmaking in the districts.

District leaders deeply integrated the vision and its strategic elements into their work. Leaders made it clear that decisions, whether at the school or central office level, needed to reflect the strategic vision. When district leaders made programmatic, personnel, or finance decisions, they continually referred to the strategic vision to guide their actions. Moreover, superintendents and assistant superintendents frequently visited schools and discussed strategies to meet the vision for improved instruction and achievement. As another example, staff develop-

Box 2:
Minneapolis's Twelve-Point Plan for Improving the Academic Performance and Graduation Rates of Students of Color

The schools will:

1. Use student data to direct action steps
2. Ensure quality teaching and focused professional development
3. Create a more diverse workforce
4. Target resources to needy schools
5. Restructure the secondary experience to increase graduation rates and [support] the transition to postsecondary [education]
6. Reduce over-referral to special education

Families and students will:

7. Improve student attendance
8. Strengthen family-school partnerships and foster positive peer influence
9. Leverage community partnerships

Together we will:

10. Invest in school readiness
11. Give students more time and greater opportunities
12. Increase support for students with behavior-related issues

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ers used the vision to ground the focus of their professional development efforts.

Using Principals to Transmit the Vision

In all districts, principals were important liaisons for building systemwide understanding of the district vision and goals. Central office leaders worked to ensure that principals understood the vision and could communicate it to teachers and parents. Yet principals did not simply implement the district vision. Rather, they molded it to fit their schools' own contexts. Aldine, Chula Vista, and Kent County experienced particular success in infusing their visions and strategic plans through the principal level. This success was in part attributable to the structured way in which districts convened their principals to address instructional issues. In Chula Vista and Aldine, principals gathered weekly to share in discussion about district goals and school-specific challenges. As a result, those principals regularly received common messages and continually discussed improvement strategies with their peers.

Using Structures and Policies to Reinforce the Vision

Many districts also employed a variety of tools to deepen the use of their visions. Each district embedded its vision into its policies. For example, district and school leaders were required to

Box 3:
Chula Vista Elementary School District
Strategic Goals and Shared Values

Strategic Goals

1. *Literacy.* All students will exit elementary school as multiliterate lifelong learners with a mastery of essential skills.
2. *Equity.* All students will have access to academic programs and resources that will enable them to achieve their full potential.
3. *Collaboration.* With the school as the center, the entire community will become full partners in education, responsible for each child's success.
4. *Technology.* All participants in the educational process will have the resources and knowledge to successfully participate in the information-based society of the twenty-first century.
5. *Safe and supportive environment.* All members of the school community will enjoy a safe, caring, and stimulating environment.

Shared Values

1. *Equality.* We believe each child is an individual of great worth entitled to develop to his or her full potential. All children can and will learn, and deserve equal access to a quality education.
2. *Equity.* We believe there is no significant difference in educational outcomes based on race, gender, or economic status. Solutions, resources, programs, services, and support are applied in a manner that develops the full potential of each child.
3. *Accountability.* We value and recognize individuals who assume responsibility for and demonstrate commitment and dedication to serving the interests of all children.
4. *Ethical responsibility.* We value each individual who practices, teaches, and serves as a role model of dignity, respect, honesty, integrity, and trust.
5. *Diversity.* We seek, encourage, and respect each individual's contributions and value a multicultural perspective.
6. *Teamwork.* We believe that families are the primary role models for our children. We are committed to teamwork and collaboration to provide maximum services for students, staff, and community members. This partnership among families, community members, and school staff is the foundation of our children's educational success.
7. *Innovation.* We are committed to challenging the status quo and embracing a technological world.
8. *Excellence.* We are committed to high standards of performance throughout the district and continuously seek and utilize new knowledge and skills.

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use the vision to justify budgetary decisions, to develop school improvement plans, and the like.

Depth of Vision Saturation

In general, leaders in each district harbored a deep understanding of the district vision. Yet while the board, central office staff, and principals strongly embraced the vision, districts experienced a greater challenge in spreading the strategic vision to the teacher corps. Aldine and Kent County, the two most centrally driven districts, appeared to experience the greatest success in building teacher understanding of the vision and strategic plan. This may in part be attributed to their significant use of principal and teacher leader networks, which made the vision visible at the classroom level.

A Vision for Instruction

As the districts refined their overarching vision, they also sought to develop a more specific vision for good instruction. In general, instructional visions were not a series of practices—for instance, cooperative learning or direct instruction—but rather a philosophy of practice. More specifically, district leaders sought to infuse a *reflective and evidence-based* approach to teaching practice. This meant that they expected teachers to actively engage students in rigorous content, assess the impact of instructional methods, reflect on their practice, work with colleagues to research and share effective practice, and make appropriate adjustments to help students learn effectively.

Box 4:
Building a Vision-Guided System—Kent County, Maryland

In the summer of 1994, Dr. Lorraine Costella arrived in Kent County as the new superintendent with a mandate from the school board to increase the achievement level of the county's children. Costella knew that the board and community were concerned about the low test scores that had come to light through the state's accountability testing—the Maryland School Performance Assessment Program (MSPAP). However, she was less clear about the vision and goals of the stakeholders in her new community. She recognized that her first imperative would be to bring focus to a district that was operating under a 35-goal strategic plan. After meeting individually with principals, board members, and other stakeholders, she felt that individual meetings were not sufficient to move the district collectively to a new focus. As a next step, district leaders convened a full-day meeting of education stakeholders. Costella told the group of teachers, parents, board members, business leaders, and others that their charge was to think fully about what they wanted children in Kent to achieve. The meeting resulted in a series of outcomes and processes that were drafted into a new set of five strategic goals. This process has become part of the district lore of inclusiveness.

Like leaders from other districts in our study, Kent County's leaders did not engage stakeholders in the development of a vision and then let it sit in a closed binder on a shelf. Rather, the leadership made sure that staff members engaged with the new vision. The district formed strategic work teams charged with setting performance indicators and strategies to achieve the five elements in the strategic vision. The board, superintendent, and central office staff used the vision as a guide to determine budgeting decisions, to monitor progress, and to make hiring decisions. In addition, Kent County required that all of its schools use the districtwide structure of school improvement planning as a vehicle to connect school goals and strategies with district goals.

The Kent County story is rooted firmly in the ability of district leaders to focus staff members on improving instruction and achievement. Kent County began its efforts to create a shared focus by bringing stakeholders together in a strategic planning process. What emerged was a living strategic plan that prioritized increasing student achievement. With the strategic plan in place, Kent County leaders set about to determine ways in which they could bring this vision to life within the schools.

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Two districts, Minneapolis and Providence, formally adopted written principles of practice. In Minneapolis, stakeholders throughout the district designed six Standards of Effective Instruction, which were ultimately included, with strong leadership from the Minneapolis Federation of Teachers, into the union contract:

1. Teachers are committed to students and their learning.
2. Teachers have a depth of knowledge of the subjects they teach and how to teach those subjects to students.
3. Teachers manage and monitor student learning for continuous improvement/progress.
4. Teachers reflect systematically about their practice and learn from experience.
5. Teachers participate as members of learning communities.
6. Teachers commit to professional development consistent with Minnesota Basic and High Standards, National Standards, and alignment of standards and goals.

Each standard included 5 to 15 indicators that outlined expectations for teaching. For instance, an indicator under standard 2 required that teachers help students gain mastery of basic and higher-order skills by "generating multiple paths to knowledge through experiential activities, discussions, study of text, interactive group work, inquiry, technology." An indicator under standard 3 asserted that teachers must "create motivating environments for student learning by using multiple instructional strategies."

In Providence, district leaders adopted an instructional philosophy developed by the University of Pittsburgh's Institute for Learning (IFL). The Principles of Learning (see Box 5) are a research-based framework of the characteristics of an effective learning environment. The district used the principles as a core set of beliefs about both pedagogy and the conditions of effective learning. IFL leaders explained that the principles "[were] designed to help educators analyze [both] the quality of instruction and opportunities for learning that they offer to students." Like the Minneapolis Standards, the principles were accompanied by indicators of how each principle could be achieved in practice. For example, principle 5, academic rigor, encouraged teachers to readily engage students in "high thinking" and require "active use of knowledge" from their students. Principle 9, self-management of learning, asserted that teachers must help students "manage their own learning by evaluating the feedback they get from others; bringing their knowledge to bear on new learning; anticipating learning difficulties and apportioning their time accordingly; and judging their progress toward a learning goal." While Aldine, Kent County, and Chula Vista did not adopt written standards, their leaders expressed similar goals of using multiple instructional strategies to build students' basic and higher-order thinking skills and of using reflective and evidence-based approaches to teaching practice.

Box 5:
Principles of Learning

1. Organizing for Effort
2. Clear Expectations
3. Recognition of Accomplishment
4. Fair and Credible Evaluations
5. Academic Rigor in a Thinking Curriculum
6. Accountable Talk
7. Socializing Intelligence
8. Learning as Apprenticeship
9. Self-management of Learning

Source: Institute for Learning (© 2001 University of Pittsburgh).

In addition to their philosophies of practice, the districts also promoted a variety of research-based strategies to improve instruction. In Kent County, the district promoted pedagogical meth-

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ods associated with Baldrige in the Classroom—a classroom-level offshoot of Baldrige in Education—that emphasized using data, setting learning goals, and taking responsibility for learning. In Minneapolis, among other strategies, the district emphasized activity-based learning in math and science and was involved in a systemwide effort to promote arts integration as a means of making the learning process more motivating for students and more sensitive to variations in student learning styles. In addition to the Principles of Learning, Providence leaders promoted professional development activities that introduced teachers to specific instructional practices associated with "balanced literacy." In Aldine, the central office provided professional development to all teachers in the use of multiple research-based instructional strategies associated with effective student learning. While Chula Vista leaders did not promote a standard set of instructional strategies, leaders strongly encouraged schools to adopt research-based reform strategies (e.g., Accelerated Schools, Micro-Society, California Governors Reading Initiative), most of which advocated specific and research-based pedagogical methods. In addition to the above examples, all districts sought to improve teacher capacity to address the diverse learning styles of their students.

In these districts, the vision for instruction was not simply about what to teach and how to teach it, but also about how to assess the effects of teaching on student learning. Central office leaders pushed principals and teachers to try various instructional methods, reflect on the efficacy of those methods, and adjust practice when data revealed that change was needed. District leaders sought to address the reality that no single instructional method would yield results for all children. Therefore, they pushed teachers to develop expertise in a range of proven instructional approaches and to differentiate their practices as needed based on review of data.

Developing Districtwide Curricula

Kent County, Minneapolis, and Aldine began their instructional reform with curricular overhaul. This reconstruction was a response in part to state standards movements and in part to research that revealed that teachers sought greater curriculum guidance. Leaving curriculum decisions up to individual schools had created difficulty for both teachers and students in these districts. Teachers were uncomfortable with the lack of guidance in how to reach state and district standards. And students, because of high rates of mobility, often encountered a curricular maze as they moved to new schools.

To provide greater clarity on what to teach and greater cohesion from school to school, the districts developed their own curricula, aligned to state standards and district goals. In the mid- to late 1990s, in the early stages of reform, the districts convened teams of teachers and administrators to write district-specific curricula based on state standards and local needs.[6] These districts did not simply seek to build their new curricula around the state standards. Teachers and administrators throughout the systems engaged in lengthy dialogue about what they wanted to ensure that students learned within and across each grade level (see Box 6).

As the process evolved in each district, teachers developed lesson plans and sample strategies to provide instructional guidance in the new curriculum. In addition, once the curriculum was developed, most districts did not simply pass out documents to teachers. Rather, they trained teacher leaders in implementation of the new curriculum and expected these leaders

[6] The authors acknowledge that the existence of a districtwide curriculum alone does not guarantee rigorous curriculum or instruction. While stakeholders in these districts spoke of efforts to create strong curricula using both districtwide goals and statewide standards, full investigation of curricular rigor was beyond the scope of this study.

to provide school site guidance. They also conducted districtwide training in the implementation of the new curriculum in the classroom.

It was clear that administrators and teachers in these three districts agreed that the new curricula provided coherent instructional guidance consistent with the districts' instructional visions and that such guidance did not exist prior to the standardization. Yet interestingly, teachers in the three districts did not report that the systemwide curricula constrained their work. Rather, many teachers asserted that they had significant pedagogical freedom within the frameworks. They explained that district leaders encouraged teachers to use their professional judgment and skills to teach in ways they deemed effective for their students. The curricula also helped them connect better within their schools and increase the rigor of their instructional work. As one Minneapolis teacher put it:

> [Because of the curriculum] we have more types of conversations going on about what we are doing. I might ask another teacher, "when are you going to do that standard" so we can coordinate. [Our] department meetings have transformed from what they used to be, which was preoccupation with topics like "what book are we going to buy." That was all we cared about, and then we would go back into our rooms and close the door.

Similarly, another Minneapolis teacher explained:

> Today, we take a department meeting and dis-

Box 6:
Knowing What to Teach: Creating the "Gospel" of Benchmarks in Aldine

In 1996, Aldine began to align its curriculum to the state standards framework, the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS), and created what became known as the *benchmarks*. That intensive undertaking both created a curriculum and helped staff develop as professionals. At the outset of the effort, central office leaders asked principals to bring language arts representatives to a districtwide meeting. Nadine Kujawa, then deputy superintendent, charged the school teams with going back to their schools to work with teachers at every grade level. Teachers were to provide answers to two questions: What do I need to teach this year? and What do students need to know to be successful next year? Teachers met in grade-level groups and then across grade levels to answer those questions. In the summer of 1997, 40 language arts teachers reconvened at the district table, bringing with them the teachers' responses to those questions. During an intensive month-long summer effort, this team produced a specific K–12 language arts scope and sequence aligned to the TEKS. Responding to teacher requests, the benchmarks evolved into six-week curricular sequences. The district started with language arts and math in the first year and then moved to science and social studies in the next year. Now benchmarks exist in all core subjects as well as art and foreign language.

As teachers became more comfortable with the benchmark curriculum, both administrators and teachers determined that interim aligned assessment measures would be helpful for teachers. As a result, teachers reconvened to write benchmark assessments—aligned tests in math and reading that could be administered every three weeks to check student progress. While the teachers and schools were required to use the benchmark curriculum, the benchmark assessments were optional.

In general, administrators viewed the benchmarks as a key to Aldine's success. According to one administrator, "We really push the benchmarks, and we have not backed off. The benchmarks drive everything we do." The remarks from an elementary teacher spoke for many: "Benchmarks tell you exactly what to teach. And the units allow you creativity. They are more fun for teachers and kids. You can be creative with benchmarks, but they give you exactly what students should learn."

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> patch of business and then move right into grade level teams. And so my [partner] English teacher and I are spending time on curriculum, which didn't use to happen. So I'm in her business and she's in mine....And we like it....I think the standards have helped us to pry that door open.

While leaders in Kent County, Aldine, and Minneapolis saw systemwide curricula as a key strategy to create cohesion in their districts, Chula Vista and Providence did not take that approach. Rather, they focused on building the capacity of their leaders to drive instructional improvement. Providence leaders expressed a desire to move in the direction of a districtwide curriculum, but because they were only three years into their reform efforts at the time of the study, the district had not yet moved forward with curricular reform.

Decisionmaking Based on Data, Not Instinct

In addition to refocusing their visions and addressing curricular cohesion, districts sought to dramatically increase their use of data to drive decisionmaking and improve instruction. Leaders determined that to improve instruction, they would need to more readily assess strengths and weaknesses in performance and instruction in their districts. As a result, the districts sought to do three things:

1. Systematically gather relevant data
2. Build multimeasure accountability systems to assess student and school progress
3. Use data to guide decisionmaking

Revamping the data and accountability systems meant identifying and acquiring multiple measures of performance instead of simply relying on end-of-year standardized test results.

Although state tests jump-started reform in several districts, the tests provided incomplete information. Districts sought to augment state test data in two ways:

1. By providing and encouraging the use of multiple types of data, including:
   - An array of student performance data (e.g., grades, student work, end-of-unit test scores, suspension information, mobility rates, attendance, diagnostic data)
   - Information on school and community climate and customer satisfaction (e.g., external evaluations, parent and student surveys, community focus groups and surveys)
2. By using formative data to provide an ongoing picture of performance

The districts filled gaps in state testing systems. Providence and Kent County, for example, sought annual measures of performance and filled grade-level gaps in their state assessments with the SAT-9 and California Test of Basic Skills (CTBS), respectively. Aldine was not fully satisfied with the rigor of the TAAS and augmented it with the more rigorous Iowa Basic Skills Tests. Minneapolis developed its own test, the Northwest Achievement Levels Test, to track how much a student had learned from grade to grade.

In addition to standardized test results, districts sought measures that would provide instructionally relevant information about student performance throughout the year. Some districts instituted interim and diagnostic testing mechanisms to monitor progress at different points in the year. Other districts used diagnostic tests in literacy to monitor ongoing growth in achievement. Aldine implemented a set of teacher-developed diagnostic tests connected to the districtwide curriculum. The optional tests were administered every

three weeks to assess student progress in mathematics, writing, reading, and other core content areas. For all of the study districts, however, formative assessment meant more than testing. Teachers and administrators increased their review of student work as a vehicle to assess student learning. Other data, such as principal observation feedback, retention statistics, and satisfaction surveys, increasingly guided decisions at the school and central office levels.

All districts used a combination of data both to increase accountability and to guide instructional improvement. Perhaps the most sophisticated accountability system among the districts was that of Minneapolis, which used more than 15 indicators to assess school progress. In addition to a wide array of testing measures, the Minneapolis system included such indicators as attendance rates, suspension rates, and student and staff perceptions of school safety. Schools were ranked according to their aggregate progress on all indicators. Minneapolis leaders believed that their system provided them with a more accurate picture of school success than did the state ranking, which relied solely on test scores. Some schools deemed to be failing under the state system showed improvement under the Minneapolis system, in part because the multiple indicators accounted for year-to-year improvement by individual students.

Using Data

Our study revealed that these districts did not just talk about data; they used them to guide important decisions about teaching and learning, particularly at the central office and principal levels. Noted a Providence administrator:

> Our decisions are made based on data, qualitative and quantitative. We look at student achievement data on an ongoing basis. We address it at principals' meetings. On Thursday of last week we had a half-day data analysis session with all the [teacher leaders]. ...We had voluntary professional development sessions on data analysis and interpretation. We use data all the time. The schools have to develop a school improvement plan and allocate their budgets based on data.

In all five districts, staff used data to guide decisions related to instruction, such as budget allocation, staff hiring, and teaching and learning gap identification. At the school level, the degree of data use varied, but there were promising examples in all districts. Principals and teachers analyzed data to monitor progress, to determine the effectiveness of their instructional approaches, and to figure out where to make adjustments. Teachers looked to data to determine specific learning patterns—for example, whether certain students exhibited difficulties in identifying words by sight, or whether they were still struggling with sounding words out. A teacher in Kent County explained how data guided work:

> We looked at our CTBS scores and our MSPAP scores, and our reading scores were flat. We needed a way to raise them. So the majority of everything that we are going to focus on this year is reading. We looked into research. Just last week, we visited a school in Delaware. They had a reading incentive program that was very successful for them. We went over and took a look at their practices and decided we should spend money on this approach.

Why did the study districts seem to make better use of data than others? They made conscious efforts to make data more usable and to make users more comfortable with them. To varying degrees, districts implemented several strategies to foster data use:

- Making the data safe
- Making the data usable
- Making use of the data

Making the Data Safe

Districts used data in part because leaders were willing to accept the information that data revealed—whether positive or negative. In fact, leaders embraced data as tools to help them improve. As noted earlier, when test data originally revealed that the districts were performing poorly, board members and superintendents took ownership of the data. They acknowledged the challenges highlighted in the data and used the information to spur change.

Districts not only accepted difficult data but readily put themselves forward for study. Each district voluntarily commissioned surveys and agreed to participate in external research on its work. Importantly, when challenging findings emerged, the leaders modeled a willingness to share the information and seek solutions. For example, in 2000, after a year of implementing the Baldrige strategic planning process, Kent County submitted to a comprehensive voluntary review by an external team of educators and business experts. The findings revealed many positive aspects of Kent County's work but also addressed areas that needed improvement. The report noted that the district lacked a comprehensive strategy for engaging teachers in decisionmaking around professional development. District leaders, rather than putting the report on a shelf, sought solutions to the problem. Within a year, the district had formed a professional development council made up of teachers, principals, union leaders, and central office staff. Furthermore, district leaders engaged teachers in the implementation of districtwide professional development.

Making the Data Usable

Throughout our interviews, stakeholders spoke of the heightened pressures the new accountability system brought to their work. Teachers, in particular, often noted that the demands related to data were daunting and overwhelming. Finding time to disaggregate and digest the large reams of data was not possible for most teachers in most schools. Recognizing that, districts sought to provide data and data analysis tools that were easy to access and understand. Some districts supplied teachers and principals with interpreted data reports, some assisted schools by funding intermediaries to help interpret school-specific data, and others provided tools to facilitate in-school disaggregation of data. In Maryland, the state also aided schools by establishing a website that allowed school and district staff to interpret school-specific data.

Making Use of the Data

While much of district-level professional development for teachers focused on content and pedagogical strategies, several districts promoted teacher professional development on data use. Kent County was particularly aggressive, dedicating several district professional development days, over the course of a few years, to a series of assessment workshops. In that series, teachers and leaders convened to dissect data and to talk about the implications of the findings. Thanks to assessment training, a Kent County teacher noted, "[you] feel that you can look at the assessments and control the results in your room. You are not at the mercy of a mysterious force." In addition to workshops, the assistant superintendent and superintendent regularly visited with principals and school leadership teams to discuss the implications of student performance data. Kent County had some success with its data efforts. Teachers throughout the system were clearly conversant in the potential of data use. They understood, at a basic level at least, how to interpret data. In some schools and among some teachers, multiple sources of data were being used in sophisticated ways to assess learning needs.

* * *

While district leaders heavily assessed student progress, they struggled to assess instructional

practice. We found little evidence that districts formally assessed the impact of professional development, for instance. Although principals engaged in classroom observation and expressed a greater confidence in their knowledge of the teaching practices in their buildings, districts lacked a formal way of measuring the effect of professional development on teaching practice.

A Systemwide Approach and School Flexibility

Although the creation of an infrastructure for instructional improvement might suggest that the districts imposed top-down reforms at the expense of school-level flexibility, that does not appear to have been the case. Over time, district leaders determined that to improve instruction, schools needed to have the flexibility to hire teachers, to use funds, and to structure their staffs and time as they saw fit.

This was particularly interesting given that the districts varied in the degree of their centralization. Aldine, the most centralized of the districts, provided teachers with curriculum frameworks that were divided into six-week units. Teachers and principals were expected to use the curriculum in their classrooms, monitor progress carefully by using data, and make adjustments to instruction based on regular review of data. Many schools used district-developed benchmark tests that were administered every three weeks and measured student progress toward standards.

By contrast, Chula Vista was purposefully decentralized. The district philosophy suggested that a majority of power be vested at the school level. In Chula Vista, schools had neither curriculum under which they were required to operate nor benchmark testing. The district depended heavily on school leaders, who were centrally supported and held accountable for reaching predetermined targets of student performance. While Kent County, Providence, and Minneapolis were neither as centralized as Aldine nor as decentralized as Chula Vista, they were oriented toward a centralized approach that provided varying levels of curricular guidance, centralized professional development, and the like.

Despite varying degrees of centralization, principals and teachers from all districts felt that they had a high degree of flexibility in their work. Noted one principal from Aldine:

> The district leaves us open to be innovative. We can be as innovative as we are willing to be....I believe that it has been instrumental to our success....Our school board and our superintendent have worked with us to ensure that we have that flexibility. If a principal thinks a certain strategy is going to work... [t]he administration will let them go for it.

Fostering a balance between district-level support and school-level flexibility to innovate was a philosophy echoed by leaders throughout the districts. Leaders expressed the understanding that, because challenges varied from school to school, school leaders would need flexibility to address challenges specific to their environments.

III. Adopting New Approaches to Professional Development:

Implementing Coherent and District-Organized Strategies to Improve Instruction

As districts sought to improve instruction, new approaches to professional development became essential. A clear vision, curricular coherence, and improved data and accountability systems were unlikely to have much impact unless teachers in the classroom learned how to use these supports to improve instruction for individual students. In the next pages, we describe how the districts made remarkable shifts in their approaches to professional development.

When we began our study, we imagined that the term *professional development* would be too narrow to capture what we would see—that the common understanding of professional development would not depict the broad range of policies, practices, and supports the districts were using to improve instruction. Our interviews with hundreds of stakeholders confirmed that belief. To varying degrees, all districts in the study moved beyond the traditional, one-time workshop approach to professional development and put in place coherent, district-organized strategies to improve instruction.

In the early 1990s, prior to current reforms, districts engaged in traditional, fragmented professional development practices. For example, central offices used their district professional development days to offer a long menu of training opportunities. The opportunities tended to be short term—a day, a couple of hours—and offered little follow-up support. School-based professional development efforts had little connection to district-level professional development. Teachers did not commonly visit other classrooms or view practices in other districts, and principals were not regular figures in the instructional discussion. Decisions at both the district and school levels were made without serious analysis of student and teacher needs.

Today, the picture looks quite different. It includes deliberate strategies to use research-based principles of professional development, widespread use of data in decisionmaking, and clear connections between district goals and school-level practices. This is in large part the result of coherent strategies that districts put into place to support and improve instruction. These strategies included the following:

- *Principles for professional development.* Districts used research-based principles of professional development to guide their work. They connected teacher and principal professional development to district goals and student needs, based the content of professional development on needs that emerged from data, and implemented multiple strategies to foster continuous learning.
- *Networks of instructional experts.* Districts sought to increase instructional leadership by building well-trained cadres of instructional experts among the teacher and principal corps. Principals were not expected to lead alone, and teachers were not expected to work in isolation. By fostering networks of instructionally proficient principals and teacher leaders (e.g., content specialists, mentor teachers), districts increased their capacity to improve instructional practice.

- *Support systems for new teachers.* Districts implemented multiple strategies, particularly mentoring programs, to assist novice teachers.
- *Strategic allocation of financial resources.* Districts invested financially in their goals of improving instruction and achievement. Before allocating their dollars, school boards, superintendents, and principals looked carefully at how to stretch and prioritize their funds to address instructional needs.
- *Encouragement and assistance in using data.* Districts provided teachers and principals with better data—and with more assistance on how to use data to guide instructional practice.[7]

Principles for Professional Development

As central office leaders searched for strategies to improve instruction, they quickly came to understand that they lacked principles to guide their professional development work. District leaders firmly believed in the research on effective professional development, which, among other things, called for professional development practices to be data driven, to provide greater opportunity for collaboration among colleagues, to push for greater reflection on practice, to provide opportunities for continual learning, and to use learning strategies appropriate to participants. District leaders recognized that to change professional development practices, they needed to rethink the criteria on which professional development was based. Over time, central office leaders began to promote a set of research-based principles to guide the way in which teachers and administrators should learn new practices.

Districts took different approaches to establishing principles. In Minneapolis, the union led the effort to put principles of professional development in place. Today, professional development principles are codified in the teacher contract and used as a tool by the central office and the union leadership to promote more rigorous, ongoing training for teachers. While other districts had not formally adopted professional development criteria, leaders in these districts promoted the use of such principles. Most districts outlined principles in written documents, including grant proposals, strategic planning documents, and school improvement plans. Using the same networks that helped to spread the vision, the districts created large cohorts of stakeholders who had internalized the principles. In the following sections, we discuss further how the principles of professional development framed the districts' approaches to improving instruction.

Networks of Instructional Experts

All five districts invested heavily in building networks of instructional experts. Doing this required a casting off of traditional role expectations. Prior to district-level reform, instruction was left largely to teachers in their classrooms. In the old system, the instructional role of the principal was idiosyncratic or nonexistent. Principals were largely building managers, and teachers had limited leadership roles.

Today, the districts are calling on central office staff, principals, and teachers to change the way they work and are building networks of instructional experts from the central office to the classroom. To understand the change, it is useful to examine two layers in the instructional support network: principals and teacher leaders.

[7] Because this strategy was also part of the districts' systemwide framework for improvement, it was discussed in Chapter II. Therefore, we will not readdress data use at length in this section.

Districts *recast the role of the principals* in their systems. Most of the districts actively sought to establish clear expectations of the principal as an instructional leader. In Providence and Chula Vista, central office leaders established written expectations of principal work. In Providence, the district adopted the nationally developed Principles of Learning, created by the Institute for Learning. By contrast, in Chula Vista district leaders and principals worked together over several years to develop written standards for principals. The standards included outcome indicators outlining the tasks principals were expected to accomplish, such as increasing student achievement, creating supportive learning environments, and building the leadership capacity and professional skills of teachers. Whether the districts used written or orally communicated expectations, the goals for principal work were quite similar across all districts. Principals were expected to create environments conducive to reflective and rigorous teaching. District leaders intended that principals would create structures that allowed teachers to use data to assess instructional practice and would work collaboratively to share ideas. District leaders also intended principals to become active instructional guides, to observe teachers daily, and to provide regular feedback on their work.

To help principals meet these high expectations, central office leaders and staff provided principals with significant support and training. In all districts, principals met regularly to discuss challenges and share ideas. Most districts established intensive training programs for principals—by sending principals to respected training academies and by bringing consultants into the district to train principals in becoming more effective classroom observers and questioners.

While it would be incorrect to suggest that all principals met all expectations, significant change in principal practice occurred across the districts. In interview after interview, principals spoke about their work in terms of improving instruction, not simply managing the building. Many principals expressed greater comfort in regularly observing teachers and providing feedback. They noted that they were increasing their use of data and encouraging more systematic use of data among teachers. Explained one Minneapolis principal:

> It is my job to create a system of accountability so that teachers are more accountable. One of the things we do is conduct a reading sample on every child in the building to assess the level [at which] each child is reading. Once the diagnostic teacher does that, she gives me a list. I review it until 9 at night. When I see children that are not reading at grade level, I make a note to the teacher. I will then sit down and ask lots of questions of the teacher. What kind of instruction are you providing? Is this student [an English Language Learner]? What do I need to do to help you with this student?

Teacher leaders also represented a fundamental component in district efforts to improve instruction. These leaders sat at both the district and school levels and provided assistance as subject matter specialists, mentors, professional developers, data specialists, and other experts in instruction. School-based teacher leaders were a particularly crucial support for principals and teachers. These teacher leaders worked closely with other teachers to provide individual coaching, model lessons, and spread good instructional practice within a school. School-based teacher leaders also extended a principal's capacity to observe teachers, provide instructional guidance, and coordinate school-based professional development. Teacher leaders often assisted principals in a variety of administrative tasks, such as scheduling, test administration, and data analysis. Whether at the district or school levels, the key function of teacher leaders was to provide an extra layer of instructional support to classroom teachers and to administrators.

To build stronger connections among the recast group of instructional leaders, each district instituted a variety of tools to facilitate communication and learning. Districts brought together principals and central office staff regularly to share ideas and discuss districtwide and school-based concerns (see Box 7). In most districts, principals met regularly (from once a month to once a week). Such meeting structures assisted districts in making principals the channel through which information traveled between the central office and the schools. Bringing principals together to learn about district goals and to share ideas increased the coherence of goals and strategies across the district.

Box 7:
Facilitating Communication in Aldine

Central office leaders nurtured the Aldine reform effort by building a structure the district called *vertical alignment.* In 1994, in response to quickly growing enrollment and research on vertical K–12 alignment, the district restructured itself into four quadrants. The leadership created vertical teams defined by the high schools and their feeder schools. The vertical structure was used to bring together principals and central office staff to address district goals and to create greater alignment in practices across grade levels. Aldine supplemented the vertical structure with a *horizontal* structure, bringing together leaders in grade-similar or school-similar groupings. Principals and central office staff met in either vertical or horizontal groupings weekly to share ideas and discuss district needs.

In addition to structures to bring together principals, many districts nurtured networks of teacher leaders. Districts brought together school-based teacher leaders to take part in common training exercises. School-based and district-based teacher leaders also met to plan and carry out districtwide professional development. By developing and using teacher leader networks, districts were able to increase the level of training across the system on key areas of need, such as data use or increasing teachers' capacity to address diverse learning needs. In general, these district-coordinated tools increased communication within schools, enhanced the capacity of the central office to transfer ideas to schools, and deepened the engagement of school staff in district-level policy and practice.

Support Systems for New Teachers

Because of growth, retirement, and turnover, the study districts faced a continual stream of new teachers. Some districts in the study hired between 200 and 500 new teachers each year. A central office administrator in Kent County explained: "Half of our teachers will be gone within five years. And so every young teacher that we can get, that we can nurture, we have to do what we can."

Four of the five districts implemented multiple strategies—mentor programs, seminars for new teacher cohorts, peer observation opportunities, and the like—to provide support for this growing cadre of first-year practitioners. Mentor programs, however, were the primary strategy used. Although all mentor programs matched new teachers with veteran teachers, the programs varied widely in scope and intensity. In some districts, mentors met weekly, while in others they met less frequently. In some districts, a veteran teacher was paired with one new teacher. Other districts employed full-time mentor teachers to work with a caseload of 15 to 30 new teachers. In general, mentors observed teaching practices, modeled lessons, and provided resources and general support. In several districts, the programs were developed in partnership with teacher unions.

Although the districts understood the value of supporting new teachers, they struggled to

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maintain these efforts in the face of budget cuts and diminished grant funding.

Strategic Allocation of Resources to Improve Instruction

In addition to investing in human resources, districts invested financially in their goals of improving instruction and achievement. Before allocating their dollars, school boards, superintendents, and principals looked carefully at how to stretch and prioritize their dollars to address instructional needs. District leaders also allocated their time strategically and used external resources carefully to maximize their investments.

Using Meeting Time to Focus on Instructional Issues

Teachers, principals, and central office staff in these districts came together fairly regularly. They met as grade-level teams, as principal cohorts, and as faculty. What distinguished these districts and many schools within them was the way in which they used this meeting time. When educators came together to work, they focused significantly on improving instruction and student achievement. Many principals and teachers noted that grade-level or faculty meetings were not gripe sessions; the meetings focused on students and how to help them achieve at higher levels. The use of data and clear goals helped to keep such meetings centered on issues relevant to improving teaching and learning.

Allocating Financial Resources to Improve Instruction

In addition to being prudent about the use of meeting time, the districts paid careful attention to how they used their money. As they allocated resources, they asked themselves questions about the resources they needed to improve instruction. Because the districts had clear goals and understood their challenges, they were able to channel financial resources to needs. The districts worked hard to ensure that funds were available for principal training, teacher leader training, and other priorities to build instruction.

Using External Resources to Fund New Approaches to Professional Development

The districts exhibited a strikingly pervasive use of external resources—both money and expertise—to undergird their efforts to improve instruction. Much of the work described above would not have occurred without the assistance of such resources, including federal, state, and private funds. Districts used external funds to build mentor programs, to augment principal support efforts, and to increase their teacher leader ranks. Such funds also paid to bring external expertise into the schools and increased release time for teachers to work together. There was significant agreement among interviewees that professional development would not have occurred at a significant scale without those external resources. Explained one Chula Vista teacher:

> We have been meeting before school and after school and on Saturdays. We did curriculum development over the summer. All of which would have been impossible without [external] funding, because without it you are asking the teachers to come in on their own time, without providing...any compensation.

The story of using external resources extended beyond funding. Districts made considerable use of external expertise. Leaders in all districts were diligent readers of research and seekers of external partners to help them fulfill their visions. Superintendents pushed central office staff and principals to seek input from research, and principals provided teachers with research. Noted a principal in Chula Vista: "We receive a

lot of support from the district. In my first year in the district the superintendent probably provided me with 20 helpful articles and books to read." In addition to research, central office staff, principals, and teachers sought out the best practices of other districts. For instance, when Minneapolis leaders were seeking guidance on their high school reform initiative, they visited practitioners from like districts throughout the country, including Boston, Chicago, and Seattle.

Whether seeking external funds or looking for guidance, these districts were strategic in the use of outside resources. Central office leaders made it clear that they did not accept funds or go after external expertise simply because the resources were available. Rather, they looked at their goals, determined the programming and resources they needed, surveyed existing programs and structures, and then sought assistance. Noted an administrator in Aldine: "What we do is look for people who can take our goals to the next step. Unless they are willing to look at all our [standards] and do it our way then we are really not interested in having them in the district."

While external resources provided districts with a powerful boost to their capacity-building efforts, these resources presented a double-edged sword. On the one hand, without such resources the districts would have been unable to provide many of the types of professional growth opportunities that drove their reform efforts. On the other hand, the heavy reliance on such funds presented challenges. Obtaining such resources created a drain on human labor in some of the districts, as it took considerable human investment to write and monitor grants. In addition, the districts' heavy reliance on short-term grants to fuel professional development created difficulty in sustaining some efforts. Throughout the districts, there were examples of programs that struggled to remain afloat after the funding had ceased.

A Fundamental Shift in Practice: New Approaches to Professional Development

New support strategies across the districts led to new approaches to professional development. Gone was the traditional single workshop. In its place, districts implemented a series of practices organized at the central office level to improve instruction.

Although the professional development shift was not complete, districts were making good progress. Teachers and principals more readily shared ideas. The content of professional development was heavily rooted in the weaknesses revealed by student achievement data. Moreover, teachers worked more deliberately to assess student needs and adjust instructional practice. (See Table 2 for an analysis of the shift.) The thoughts of a Kent County teacher reflected those of many interviewed: "We are beginning to work smarter. We are doing individual assessments and are identifying students' needs and tailoring instruction."

More specifically, districts were no longer simply offering workshops and sending teachers to conferences. They were shifting their practice to meet the newly adopted principles of professional development and were making use of new networks of instructional leaders. As an example, districts changed the way in which they used traditional resources, such as district-level professional development days. Under the new systems, districts focused professional development days on a few key topics rather than on a large menu of disconnected issues. Central office and school staffs determined the topics by looking at needs that emerged through the data. Furthermore, as a way to offer additional opportunities for job-embedded professional development, the districts shifted a majority of their release days back to

schools. In most districts, schools were asked to use the time to extend the discussion on district-level training but to do it in a school-based context. Teachers and principals highly praised the shift.

Changes in professional development were not initiated at only the district level. School-level staff followed the district example and adapted the new principles of professional development to their schools. In many schools, teachers and principals felt empowered to tackle challenges together. They also expressed a professional responsibility to seek new ways to improve instruction. Each district had many schools that had created staffing and scheduling structures that enabled teachers to work together effectively to address instructional challenges. These shifts were particularly evident in elementary schools. Furthermore, some schools used resources and policy opportunities in ways that freed teachers for grade-level meetings, observations of colleagues, and the like. Many schools used teacher leaders to provide coverage for peer observation or small group collaboration. As an example, an elementary school in Minneapolis used state compensatory funds to hire a regular substitute teacher who worked weekly in the school and provided coverage so that teachers could observe colleagues.

Table 2. New Strategies for Improving Instruction: Professional Development Characteristics Before and After Instructional Reform

Before Instructional Reform	After Instructional Reform
Districts did not provide a systemwide framework to support good instruction.	**Districts implemented a framework to support instructional improvement.** Common elements included: ▪ A vision focused on student learning and instructional improvement ▪ Systemwide curricula that connected to state standards and were coherent across grade levels ▪ A multimeasure accountability system and systemwide use of data ▪ A new approach to professional development—one that involved a coherent set of strategies to improve instruction ▪ Instructional leadership distributed across stakeholders ▪ Strategic allocation of financial and human resources ▪ Use of high-quality research to inform decisionmaking and practice
Districts lacked a set of research-based principles to guide professional development efforts.	**Districts and schools used research-based principles to guide professional development implementation.**
Little connection existed between district goals and school-based professional development.	**Significant connections existed between district visions and school strategies to improve instruction.**
Instructional leadership was diffuse, and leaders were not trained in a coordinated way. ▪ There was limited support for principals to become instructional leaders. ▪ Teacher leaders existed but were not used in a coordinated, explicit manner.	**Districts created networks of instructional leaders that provided significant support to teachers.** ▪ Districts expected principals to be instructional leaders and provided significant support. ▪ Districts formed networks of teacher leaders who provided instructional assistance to teachers, principals, and central office administrators.
Data were not widely used to inform instructional and professional development decisions.	**Professional development decisions at the school and district levels were based on needs that emerged from data.**
Professional development at the district level was ad hoc.	**Districts modeled research-based professional development.** Districts incorporated the criteria of goal-focused, ongoing, data-driven professional development by: ▪ Ensuring that districtwide professional development days had a year-long focus and were connected to district goals ▪ Shifting districtwide professional development days to the school level ▪ Promoting action research among stakeholders
Resources were not used in a targeted way to leverage instructional improvement.	**Districts strategically used internal and external resources to improve instruction.** Districts used data and their visions strategically to target the allocation of resources to improve instruction.

IV. Redefining Leadership Roles: Multiple Stakeholders Drive Instructional Reform

When we began our study we were interested not simply in learning about how districts built teaching capacity, but also in understanding the roles and interactions of the multiple stakeholders in this effort. What we found was that district leaders determined that no single stakeholder could tackle instructional improvement alone. The expansion of instructional leadership did not occur overnight. But during the course of the reforms, the districts extended the leadership from a few traditional positions—the superintendent and principal—to include other actors: assistant principals, teacher leaders, central office staff, union leaders, and school board members. In addition, in most districts, external actors—representatives from state offices, universities, and communities—worked in a coordinated manner with district staff. In these districts leadership was not simply shared; most stakeholder groups took on the elements of reform they were best positioned to lead. In the next sections, we discuss how those qualifications fostered mutual leadership.

Establishing Sound Stakeholder Relations

For stakeholders in the study districts, simply getting along was not the goal. Leaders in these districts determined that strong relationships held little value if they did not create positive change for children. As a result, a key goal of most district leaders was to learn to work together to improve teaching and student learning.

Across the districts we saw evidence of success in reaching that goal. In most districts, boards and superintendents shared mutual respect and a strong ability to work with each other. Superintendents and central office staff repeatedly praised boards for setting policies that provided them with the flexibility to innovate. Principals also cited significant support from central office leaders. In addition, across the districts, teacher leaders worked closely with district staff and principals to increase the level of instructional support for teachers.

Three districts—Aldine, Kent County, and Minneapolis—developed particularly effective working relationships across major stakeholder groups. In Kent County and Minneapolis, the board, union, and central office leaders worked together closely, communicating regularly about innovations and challenges. In Aldine, the board and central office shared a similar relationship.[8] In those highly collaborative districts, leaders and practitioners were able to introduce innovation more readily and with less suspicion. Less time was consumed attending to disagreements and discord, and more time and resources were invested in support structures for principals and teachers. Positive interactions in those districts did not mean that the stakeholders always got along or that they ignored challenges. In fact, an ability to productively discuss differences was most evident in districts where the greatest harmony existed among stakeholders.

Positive interactions between the central office and union were less consistent across the districts than among other stakeholders in the system. Yet as we discuss later, where a strong relationship existed between union and central office leaders, it provided a powerful force for change in a district.

[8] Aldine did not have an active union (fewer than 10 percent of teachers belonged to the union); our findings related to unions do not reflect data from that district.

Working on Working Together

Collaboration and trust did not simply happen in the districts; rather, they were the result of deliberate and involved processes. Led by their boards and superintendents, the most collaborative districts in the study worked on working together. They engaged in ongoing dialogue, created cross-role leadership structures to facilitate communication among stakeholders, and intentionally sought tools to facilitate collaboration.

In Kent County, for instance, the Baldrige in Education process provided a framework for the central office, the board, principals, and teachers to work together. The process helped district stakeholders at all levels set a collective vision, develop strategies to reach the vision, use data to monitor progress toward reaching goals, and act on challenges that surfaced. Central office staff worked closely with union, principal, and teacher leaders to set systemwide goals. Simultaneously, teachers used the process to guide them in grade-level meetings. The framework provided staff at all levels with a nonthreatening vehicle to assess progress, acknowledge weaknesses, and tackle challenges. Noted one principal:

> In the last two years since [Baldrige implementation]...we've really been looking at continuous improvement....And we are all allowed as leaders of schools to make risky decisions. Sometimes they work. Sometimes they don't....We try something. We check it out. If it doesn't work, we change it.

As another example, in Minneapolis, when the school board sought to improve its work, it engaged in a training process called the Carver method. The Carver approach emphasized the board's role in establishing goals, setting indicators, aligning resources to the goals, monitoring progress, holding the system accountable through the superintendent, and communicating with the public. The process pushed the Minneapolis board to speak with a common voice once decisions were made. It also provided the board with set norms that assisted its members in focusing on policy issues rather than engaging in the daily administration of district affairs.

In addition to using external tools to facilitate coalition building, the most highly collaborative districts strove to be inclusive. District leaders seeking to implement new programs or policies included key stakeholders right from the beginning. For instance, when Kent County began its work with the Baldrige process, leaders established a committee of teachers, principals, union leaders, university colleagues, board members, parent leaders, and other interested parties. Stakeholders in the most collaborative districts were not simply informed about new efforts but involved in their development and implementation.

Redefining Instructional Leadership

Though working well together was important, it was equally critical to be doing the right work. Over the course of their reform efforts, district leaders determined that improving instruction would require redefining leadership and finding ways for all stakeholders to drive that improvement. No single group would be expected to tackle instructional reform alone. Instead, leadership would be shared, and members of each stakeholder group would take on roles they were best suited to lead. Elmore (2000) called that the *theory of comparative advantage*. Leaders, he asserted, should tackle arenas they are best positioned, or have a comparative advantage, to lead. In his model, policymakers should set performance targets and hold leaders accountable for reaching them. Central office staff should design systems and provide support networks to assist school-based educators. And principals and teachers should

have the freedom to engage in practices best suited to their talents and to the needs of children in their schools.

By and large, we saw districts working toward a distributed leadership of comparative advantage. Boards in the study districts focused primarily on developing policies that supported instructional reform but did not get involved in the daily administration of district work. Superintendents and central office staff supported schools by providing more responsive training and by building and financing networks of teacher leaders. And many principals used the combination of district support and freedom to guide their staffs to assess challenges and rethink practice (see Table 3). In the following section, we explore this forward momentum as well as some of the challenges in strengthening and clarifying the roles of stakeholders in instructional reform.

The School Board

School boards in most of the study districts were *policy and accountability* driven. Boards held the superintendent and his or her colleagues accountable for progress but did not engage in the daily administration of schools. Explained one board member: "I am not an administrator; that is not my job. I am not a professional educator....[The superintendent and her staff] are the professionals, and we say to them, 'These are the results we want to see; you are in charge of how to do it.'"

In addition, the boards took their policy roles seriously and promulgated policies to support instructional reform. For example, in Chula Vista, when the district's top administrators determined that they needed to create an exceptional cadre of principals, they asked the board for help. As a first measure, the board passed a policy endorsing higher salaries for principals, which gave the superintendent considerable leverage in attracting strong principals to the district. In addition, the board provided the superintendent with the flexibility to administer raises and bonuses, and supported the superintendent in dismissing principals who were not meeting performance standards.

As important as the issues on which these districts focused was the manner in which they worked. Above all, the boards were *driven by the goal to improve student achievement.* That notion was not simply chimerical; the boards maintained a focus on teaching and student learning needs in their decisionmaking. They adopted visions and strategic plans that placed children's learning needs at the center, and they attempted to implement policies to support the strategic plan. An Aldine board member explained, "Everything we do is based on what's best for the children, period. Whether you are dealing with an administrative issue or a student issue, we ask, 'What's best for the children?'"

Most boards also placed importance on *speaking publicly with one voice.* The boards *strove for consensus and collegiality,* and members acted respectfully toward one another in public discourse. Although philosophical differences sometimes existed, the norm of respect among colleagues guided their efforts to work through those differences. That cohesion was aided in part by the composition of the boards; in four of the five districts, board members were elected at large rather than as representatives of regions within the district. This appeared to help sustain collegiality and avoid jurisdictional divisions. In addition, the boards promoted a solution-seeking orientation. Boards encouraged their staffs to tackle difficult issues and seek innovative solutions. The collegial manner and *solution-seeking orientation* of these boards set a tone that permeated their districts. An administrator in Kent County summed up the board's work as follows: "The board recognizes its role as a policymaker. [Board members] are very

professional. They never humiliate each other. They have no hidden agendas. The goal is what is best for the children."

In Aldine, Chula Vista, Kent County, and Minneapolis, the school boards were particularly effective, using their authority to shift district agendas toward improving teaching and learning. The boards were not only catalysts to reform efforts, but also significant forces in setting policy to improve district instructional practice. Yet this high degree of focus from boards is not assured. Further study is needed to determine if new, instructionally focused board candidates are being cultivated and if community members fully understand their importance in sustaining instructionally focused school boards.

The Central Office

In all districts, the central offices were powerful guiding forces for improving instruction. In developing reform strategies, district leaders began to rethink and revise the core elements of central office work. In many cases, leaders determined that there were certain roles that central offices were uniquely positioned to play. In fact, leaders reasoned, if the central office did not take the lead, the role would not be performed. Such roles included creating a districtwide curriculum, building a high-quality principal corps, and devising systemwide supports for new teachers.

As central offices undertook these new responsibilities, they paid considerable attention to collaboration with other stakeholders. They engaged stakeholders at every level of the system in the design and implementation of innovations. As an example, when Aldine began its efforts to align its curriculum to state standards, the central office worked closely with principals and teachers. As a first step, district leaders convened principals to discuss the development of the districtwide curriculum and then asked principals to return to their schools to engage teachers in discussions about expectations for student learning.

While superintendents sought to restructure the central office role, they paid close attention to the interaction with schools. In general, superintendents used the central office to provide a framework of supports within which schools were encouraged to innovate and address challenges specific to their buildings.

Superintendents

A striking number of similarities emerged in the actions of the superintendents in the five study districts. They were visionary and visible, instructionally focused, data oriented, and solution seeking. We address these characteristics below.

Superintendents in the districts were visionary leaders. Although the urgency for change often emerged from boards and other external forces, the superintendents brought substance to the urgency. They pushed for greater focus on teaching and learning and introduced new structures and policies to improve instruction. In most districts, the school boards were savvy about understanding the need for instructional reform and hired superintendents explicitly for their skills in the instructional arena.

Superintendents in the study districts spent the vast majority of their time focusing on improving instruction and instructional supports. The extent of their efforts was visible in the district goals and strategies for improvement. In most districts, the superintendent led the charge to bolster the rigor of the curricula and to make professional development more effective. Moreover, superintendents pushed stakeholders to allocate resources to increase instructional support. Superintendents also provided direct support for instructional leadership, visiting principals regularly in their schools to celebrate improvements and address challenges.

Table 3. Distributing Instructional Leadership: The Roles of Multiple Stakeholders in Improving Instruction

Stakeholders	Observed Roles
Board members	▪ Made decisions based on both students' needs and data ▪ Designed policies that supported instruction ▪ Held the chief administrator accountable for results but did not get involved in day-to-day management decisions ▪ Engaged in productive, collegial discourse ▪ Confronted difficult issues and sought solutions
Superintendents and central office staff	▪ Viewed instructional reform as an important way to improve student achievement ▪ Designed systems to support school-level educators in improving instruction ▪ Built multimeasure accountability systems ▪ Used data to guide decisionmaking ▪ Spearheaded efforts to align curriculum to standards and to create curricular cohesion across the district ▪ Built a cadre of principals as instructional leaders ▪ Fostered cadres of teacher leaders to extend instructional assistance to teachers ▪ Implemented a system to support new teachers ▪ Reallocated resources to support instruction ▪ Tackled challenges by seeking solutions
Union leaders	▪ Worked actively with district leaders to increase instructional supports for teachers ▪ Communicated with district leaders about teacher professional development needs ▪ Built trust across stakeholders by communicating visibly and regularly with district leaders ▪ Introduced and supported research-promoted approaches to professional development
Principals	▪ Provided instructional leadership to the school ▪ Transmitted and operationalized the district vision into the school building ▪ Used data to drive decisionmaking and to address instructional strengths and weaknesses ▪ Engaged in collaboration with peers across the district on a regular basis ▪ Built a framework for productive professional development ▪ Championed induction by actively supporting efforts to recruit and retain new teachers ▪ Reallocated resources to support instruction
Teacher leaders	▪ Extended the level of instructional support provided to teachers ▪ Served as a bridge between the administration and the classroom ▪ Assisted principals by overseeing administrative roles related to instruction (e.g., data analysis, professional development planning)
State education leaders	▪ Provided seed funding for district-level professional development efforts for teacher leaders, mentoring, principal training, and so forth ▪ Engaged district leaders in developing statewide instructional supports (e.g., curriculum frameworks, literacy initiatives, mentoring programs)
Universities	▪ Began to shift practice from working with individual schools to working with entire districts ▪ Began to target assistance based on the vision and needs that emerged from district data ▪ Began to partner strategically with districts
Parents	▪ Engaged minimally in instructional improvement efforts

Note: The actions of board members, superintendents, principals, teacher leaders, and parents were observed in at least four districts. The actions of union leaders, state education leaders, and universities were observed in two or more districts.

The power of many of the superintendents emerged not only from their well-respected ideas but also from their willingness to take on challenges. Across all districts, the superintendents were solution seekers. They looked to all resources—human, financial, and external—to help them attack a problem. Furthermore, their commitment to seeking solutions, and not dwelling on problems, helped to create a solution-oriented ethos in the districts.

One characteristic that stood out among superintendents was their openness to accountability and data as tools for improving instruction and achievement. With support from their boards, superintendents did not run from negative data and poor performance, but instead viewed such data as a wakeup call. As an example, Minneapolis's superintendent, Carol Johnson, used data as a powerful tool to address low performance. In 1999, frustrated by poor results in high schools, Johnson asked her research department for a statistical report on student failures by subject area. The data revealed that the highest percentage of failures was in mathematics and social studies. She then asked for data comparing student failures with attendance and found that many students failing courses at the high school level were in school 95 percent or more of the time. That finding ran counter to a previous public promise of the superintendent and board guaranteeing academic success for students with high attendance rates. Instead of shelving the data, Johnson took the information to the district's high schools and presented it to teachers—not to accuse them of failure but to create an awareness of the situation and involve them in seeking solutions. She pointed out that the fact that student failure was focused in particular subject areas meant that teaching, not just student backgrounds, played a role in the low rates of achievement. By presenting the data the way she did, Johnson showed a willingness to hold herself and school faculties collectively responsible for understanding and solving problems.

The superintendents were also skillful in building and maintaining connections among stakeholders. For example, during her tenure in Kent County, Superintendent Lorraine Costella engaged stakeholders in regular and ongoing dialogue. She created the Baldrige leadership team, which brought together leaders from across the district to address needs and strategies for improvement. She met at least monthly with the union president and board chair. And, she pushed all stakeholders to talk about difficult issues. By working closely with the leaders throughout the district, Costella raised the bar of trust among those entities—a trust that facilitated her work in reforming the district.

The Union

Teacher unions can play a variety of roles within school districts. Traditionally, teacher unions have focused on bargaining for improved working conditions—salaries, benefits, and length of workday. Another emerging union role is to advocate for teacher professional growth needs. In the study districts, the unions' focus varied. In some districts, the union focused primarily on working conditions; in others, the union was heavily involved in building better professional supports for teachers. Regardless, the study districts provided instructive examples of how union and central office leaders can forge productive agreements to improve instructional capacity.

One role union leaders played was to communicate the voice of teachers to the board and central office staff. This was particularly critical given the ambitious reforms established in the study districts. In the course of their change efforts, the districts increased expectations and demands on teachers. While the districts went some distance to provide additional time, training, and instructional supports, there remained a variance between the expectations on teacher

performance and the structural supports that were available to meet those expectations. As a result, many teachers felt high levels of anxiety and were concerned that they did not have all of the tools needed to accomplish district aims.

In such cases, unions played a role in articulating teachers' concerns to district leaders. And in these districts, the central offices and boards generally heeded the union's input and adjusted their strategies accordingly. Providence and Kent County provide examples of unions voicing teacher concerns and acting as intermediaries to create solutions. In Providence, two key elements of the district improvement strategy were principal "walkthroughs" (structured, nonevaluative, instructionally oriented teacher observations) and school-based coaches (teacher leaders who modeled lessons, observed teachers, and provided other supports). Some teachers, accustomed to privacy in their classrooms, objected to principal walkthroughs and refused to extend invitations to coaches. When those teachers complained to their union, union leaders carried teacher concerns to the central office leadership. The central office responded by inviting union leaders to participate in walkthroughs and observational training and to accompany principals and coaches into classrooms. Convinced that the observations were both nonevaluative and a useful instructional support for teachers, union leaders got the word out to members that the union supported the strategies, and the leaders encouraged teachers to welcome them.

A similar collaboration between Kent County's union and central office leadership helped increase productive supports to teachers. In the early years of Kent County's reforms, the central office planned and implemented centralized, mandatory professional development. Teachers, frustrated by the quality of the professional development, used sick and personal days to avoid the training. Aware of the frustrations, the union president sat down with the superintendent to voice teachers' concerns. Working together, the union and central office leaders devised mutually beneficial solutions. The central office formed a professional development council—made up of teachers, principals, and central office staff—to guide decisionmaking. In addition, over time the central office turned over the design and implementation of professional development to teachers. Seeing those shifts and realizing that the new professional development was a valuable support for teachers, the union actively encouraged teachers to attend.

Unions played another important role in the study districts by working cooperatively with district leaders to increase instructional support for teachers. In Minneapolis, the union drove efforts to increase supports to new teachers, to provide better guidelines for instructional expectations, and to create career ladders for teachers to become leaders. While establishing cadres of teacher leaders was essential to improving instruction in all districts, in some districts this required working through a number of issues with union leaders: Would applicants for these jobs be chosen based on seniority or based on performance criteria? Would the leaders and coaches have a role in teacher evaluation? In what job category would they be classified? In several districts, the union worked with the superintendent's staff to answer these questions in a way that was within the bounds of existing contracts and met the need for capacity building.

Two districts—Kent County and Minneapolis—exhibited particularly robust partnerships between the union and central office. In both districts, the union leaders and superintendents sought to find common ground as well as to bridge differences. The union president and superintendent met monthly to discuss common issues. While the fact that these leaders met regularly was important, their ability to communicate openly and honestly about ideas

and challenges provided the foundation for productive engagement. Moreover, the ability to speak honestly helped to ensure that concerns were voiced and solutions sought before they escalated to grievances or created rifts at the bargaining table. Explained one union leader:

> Probably one of the most meaningful things that...developed between the administration and the teachers' association is the open dialogue. [The superintendent] and I meet once a month....And we have been able to head off major grievances and major confrontations because of our ability to work behind the scenes and within the framework to try to accommodate people and to come up with the best solution for all sides. And that's been very, very effective.

A second key element of the partnership was that in these districts the central office and the union acted as partners in the planning and development of major initiatives. In Kent County, the central office engaged union leaders early in the planning of several instructional reform initiatives, and in Minneapolis, both the central office and the union included each other in the design and implementation of such initiatives.

A third element of the productive partnership in these districts was the role union leaders took in advocating and supporting efforts to improve professional support for teachers. In Minneapolis, the union was in the vanguard of developing and implementing structures and initiatives to build teacher capacity. The union took the lead in building a tenure process that required high levels of professional development for teachers. Union leaders worked closely with administrators on numerous grants and initiatives to introduce greater opportunities for professional development into the schools, including a year-round induction program for new teachers and the establishment of professional development centers in low-performing schools to provide greater resources to teachers. The union also initiated and supported the creation of numerous teacher leader positions that provided teachers with a continuum of opportunities as they progressed in their careers.

A fourth strategy, used primarily in Minneapolis, was the inclusion of key strategies for teacher professional development in the teacher contract. For instance, the Minneapolis teachers' contract included the district's principles of professional development; it outlined a multitude of teacher leader positions, provided guidance on a complex peer appraisal system, and codified several joint committees that managed district professional development activities. The contract language provided leverage for both union and district leaders to push for strong professional development.

In both Kent County and Minneapolis, the strong relationship between the union president and the superintendent helped to model trust throughout the district. Furthermore, the ability of union and central office leaders to forge trusting and productive relationships signaled that stakeholders needed to work together to address problems and create solutions.

Principals

District leaders viewed principals as the primary leaders of instructional improvement at the school level. So, while not surprising, it was encouraging that most principals interviewed for the study described their roles in terms of supporting the instructional work of their teachers. Throughout the districts, principals:

- Provided instructional leadership
- Used data to guide their decisionmaking and fostered the use of data among their staffs
- Observed classroom instruction and provid-

ed teachers with nonevaluative feedback

- Created structures and time for teacher collaboration
- Partnered with cadres of teacher leaders to strengthen instructional supports
- Transmitted and operationalized the district vision into the school
- Refocused professional development to meet district principles

While not all principals engaged in all the actions above, both principals and administrators spoke about significant shifts in principal practice to provide more instructional guidance to teachers. Observed one Kent County administrator: "Our principals are among the best instructional leaders in the state. They are eager learners. They are not resistant to change, and they are thoughtful about change. They learn from each other."

Overall, principals sought to increase the instructional assistance and feedback to their teachers. Many principals, particularly at the elementary level, spent time each week observing classroom practice. Some principals reconfigured their administrative teams to accomplish this goal. In some schools assistant principals shared curriculum and instruction duties with their principals, acting as supervisors for certain subject matter. Principals also turned to teacher leaders—subject matter specialists, department heads, and other teachers with release time—to provide teachers with feedback on instruction. These strategies increased the degree of observation, lesson modeling, and feedback to teachers. Noted one principal:

> We spend a lot of time in the classroom. We use a lot of strategies to provide feedback. I encourage...teaming with veteran teachers and new teachers. The veteran teachers have a lot to offer, but the new teacher comes with new innovations. So I encourage even my veteran teachers to take a look at new teachers and for them to share ideas and strategies....I give [my new teachers] a list of teachers that I want them to see.

Principals also worked closely with their staffs to reorient their approaches to professional development. Like the districts, schools were moving away from one-shot workshops, and principals and teachers sought new ways of engaging teachers in professional learning. As an example, principals spoke at length about the use of data as an important starting point in assessing instructional practice. They worked readily with teacher leaders and assistant principals to disaggregate test data and to review other forms of data on student achievement. Elementary principals in particular spoke of how they used data in their schools. Two Kent County principals remarked:

> ***PRINCIPAL 1:*** Our best discussions take place when we look at student scores because you can look and see why [we missed] these kids. These are bright kids; why didn't they achieve at higher levels? We start to have that discussion.
>
> ***PRINCIPAL 2:*** When we looked at the data we found out...that reading for literary experience was our weakest area. So we had to then become informed as to what we needed to do strategically in the classroom to improve in this area, which meant looking at things like current research and books that were provided to us in the area of reading. One that jumps out in my mind is *Literacy Constructing Meaning,* and we on the school improvement team purchased those books under the recommendation of someone in the [Maryland] State Department [of Education] who was in charge of reading.

In addition, principals worked diligently to motivate and acknowledge the good practice of their teachers. They did this in part by providing support for training and instructional resources.

Many teachers noted that principals worked hard to find the resources—money, release time, and substitute teachers—to allow teachers to attend professional development workshops relevant to school goals and instructional needs. Principals regularly provided teachers with written materials, manipulatives, and other instructional aids. Explained one Aldine teacher: "Our principal invites us into her office. You go in and it's like Christmas; there are just piles [of resources]. She'll say... 'just come in and choose what you want.'" Some principals relied on regular, written communication or verbal praise. An Aldine elementary principal noted:

> We're really trying to encourage the implementation of higher-order thinking skills and more advanced problem solving. So when I see that happening, I discuss it with people and let them know. I give a lot of praise and encourage them to share their good ideas.

The pressure on principals to produce results was significant in these five districts. If schools were not improving, principals were replaced.

Yet principals were not left to their own devices. All districts provided supports to help principals become astute instructional leaders. Several districts brought in outside experts to train principals in observational techniques and in classroom walkthroughs. These efforts provided principals with specific tools to assess teaching practice and to provide instructive feedback. Principals noted that the training increased their comfort with observing and reflecting on teaching practice (see Box 8). Districts also worked closely with principals to aid them in tying school-level strategies to the district agenda and in becoming effective analyzers of data. In addition, they worked with principals to increase their knowledge and understanding of state and district standards.

Districts also created formal structures to increase principal dialogue across the district. In two of the districts, principals met weekly to share challenges, exchange strategies, and learn about emerging issues. In other districts, principals met monthly in full groups and in small peer groups. As a result of the formal gatherings, principals throughout the districts developed numerous informal collegial networks. Principals repeatedly noted that they relied heavily on a small group of colleagues with whom they connected by e-mail and phone weekly, and sometimes daily.

In addition to direct supports, the central office assisted principals by cultivating teacher leaders and assistant principals to provide instructional and administrative assistance in schools. Leaders in most districts stressed the instructional importance of assistant principals in their systems. Assistants were not viewed as overseers of discipline and administration. Rather, in many schools, they managed core areas of curriculum and instruction. Noted one Chula Vista administrator: "It used to be that associate [principals] just pushed pencil and paper. Today they are expected to be curriculum leaders."[9] In addition, teacher leaders offered similar instructional and administrative assistance to principals in targeted areas.

Finally, most districts—concerned about a leadership shortage—sought to cultivate assistant principals and teacher leaders as the next generation of leadership at the school and central office levels.

Teacher Leaders

As districts attempted to improve instructional practice, they relied heavily on an emerging cadre of leaders—teacher leaders. As mentioned earlier, most districts envisioned this role as a bridge between the administration and the classroom, under the theory that

[9] In Chula Vista, assistant principals are called *associate* principals to express a different philosophy of the *associate* principal role.

exemplary teachers who had recently left the classroom would provide more meaningful guidance to teachers.

Most districts employed teacher leaders at the school and district levels. The roles of district-level teacher leaders varied. Some provided support in a particular curriculum area, such as math or reading. Others designed systemwide professional development. Still others worked primarily to provide assistance to struggling schools.

The benefits of the school-based teacher leaders were many (see Box 9). Teacher leaders provided teachers with additional instructional guidance. Among other tasks, they modeled lessons in the classroom, assisted struggling teachers, created lessons, and provided materials. In addition, they provided a layer of assistance to principals. By engaging in classrooms with teachers, teacher leaders deepened the principals' capacity to offer teachers instructional support. In many districts, school-level teacher leaders also relieved principals of administrative duties that related to instruction, including professional development planning, oversight of test administration, and data analysis. In Aldine, for example, schools used teacher leaders to analyze data and explain

Box 8:
The Principal's Role in Chula Vista

Today, principals in Chula Vista are both building leaders and district liaisons, but that was not always the case. Not long after Dr. Libby Gil came to Chula Vista as superintendent in 1993, it became clear that life for principals was going to change. She met with all principals and asked them for feedback on their jobs. She began to talk about her vision and expectations for principals. Under this new vision, principals would act as executive leaders of their buildings—instructional leaders, business managers, motivators, innovators, and developers of learning communities. Yet as she interviewed the principals, she found that a majority of them were working under a strict building manager model. Thus, the first imperative was to shift the understanding of a principal's role.

To help make this shift, Chula Vista leaders—central office staff and principals—engaged in a unique process to define the expectations for principals. Over the course of five years, these leaders came together to develop and revise a peer evaluation process that would define the new principal role—what it meant to be an instructional and managerial leader in Chula Vista. The peer evaluation process would become the hallmark of Chula Vista's effort to support principals and hold them accountable for success. Today the evaluation consists of multiple performance standards expressed through a four-level rubric. The principal is held accountable for ensuring student achievement, building staff capacity, ensuring customer satisfaction, acting with integrity and fairness, and creating a safe and nurturing environment.

To transition to the new way of working outlined in the peer evaluation, principals needed significant support from the board and central office. First, the board raised principals' salaries and gave the superintendent flexibility to administer monetary incentives to high-performing principals. In addition, central office leaders devised a multilayered support structure. Principals received training to assist in building their skills as classroom observers, collaboration cultivators, data users, and the like. The district also facilitated a series of ongoing supports, including weekly meetings with small peer groups and weekly information packets containing relevant data and research.

The pressure on principals to produce results is significant in Chula Vista. Yet many principals reported that they came to Chula Vista expressly to work in what they described as an innovative, supportive, high-stakes system. Explained one principal, "You are given a lot of freedom, but there is a lot of liability and responsibility along with that." This principal also asserted that he felt supported by the central office: "The district is very upfront if you are having difficulties. It's not about chopping you up; it's about assisting you to improve. And there are many opportunities to improve."

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the analyses to teachers. As a result, teachers had a richer sense of student performance and were able to make instructional adjustments based on needs unearthed from the data.

In addition to the individual benefits to the teacher, networks of teacher leaders expanded the coherence of instructional practice across schools within these districts. Both district- and school-based teacher leaders were trained at the district level and often were involved in district-level decision meetings. As a result, they became intimately engaged in districtwide strategies and were able to transmit these strategies to the classroom. In addition, teacher leaders increased the input of teachers in the design of districtwide instructional practices.

Districts used a variety of policy and funding levers to build their teacher leader ranks. In several districts, central office leaders mandated the use of teacher leaders in schools, particularly in low-performing schools. Some central offices shared the cost of these required positions. In Minneapolis, for example, schools identified as struggling were required to hire half-time reading and math resource teachers, with the costs shared between the school and the district. In Chula Vista, principals were evaluated on their ability to build teacher leadership capacity. In Aldine, the district expected all schools to support at least one teacher leader and encouraged schools to assign two teachers to the role. To help schools create those positions, the district funded the cost of one teacher leader in each building.

While the growth of teacher leader positions brought a significant amount of expertise and resources to the professional development work across the districts, teacher leaders experienced a few challenges. In many districts, the premise behind teacher leaders was to increase the intensity of follow-up for district- and school-based training initiatives. While teacher leaders appeared to increase instructional support, they struggled to find time within the school day to provide the desired level of follow-up. That was, in part, because teacher leaders carried high administrative and instructional support loads. Principals and central office leaders placed high expectations on teacher leaders to assist classroom teachers through demonstration teaching, peer coaching, and observation. District leaders and principals also gave teacher leaders significant administrative work. As a result of the administrative load, teacher leaders had less time for classroom work than they desired. Despite such struggles, teacher leaders were a crucial element of the instructional reform efforts of all the districts.

The State

The role of the state varied in the study districts. Several of the districts gave the state high marks for policy and administrative support, while other districts felt that state policies and practices distracted them from their reforms. Yet, interestingly, all five districts took advantage of state policy initiatives that they believed enhanced their reform efforts.

In three districts, Aldine, Kent County, and Providence, district leaders described the state as playing a catalyzing role in their reforms. In Aldine and Kent County, state standards and accountability policies galvanized local leaders to take action in the face of poor test results. State policies not only jump-started their reforms but also provided varying degrees of guidance along their journey to improve instruction. In large measure, leaders in these districts viewed the state as partners.

In Aldine, for example, the district used a state law mandating mentoring programs for new teachers as a push to implement a needed program to support its large influx of novice teachers. Furthermore, when this policy came about, the district did not seek to minimally satisfy it

but rather worked to create the most productive program possible. Likewise, when the state mandated that primary teachers be trained in teaching reading, the district viewed it as an opportunity to further district goals around literacy.

The districts were not merely influenced by state policies and practices; rather, they took a proactive approach to shaping policies at the legislative and administrative levels. The districts charged highly placed staff with learning about and influencing state legislation and state board of education policies. They also made sure that central office leaders sat on important state task forces concerning curriculum and instruction. At the same time, the involvement was reciprocal: the state departments of education actively sought district input. Across the

Box 9:
Teachers as Instructional Leaders: Improving Literacy in Providence

In 1999, Providence teachers and leaders began to look at their literacy data, and they were not comfortable with what they saw. Test scores had been flat, and leaders determined that a new approach to instructional reform was needed to improve student achievement. As part of its literacy-focused reform strategy, Providence created a multitiered system of instructional support. While principals were to be the overall leaders, the district invested considerable resources in a network of teacher leaders, which included both "instructional literacy coaches" and "lead team teachers."

Employing a literacy coach in each elementary school was a key element of the district strategy to improve student achievement. Yet appointing literacy coaches at each school was a massive undertaking that required deep collaboration between district and union leadership. In establishing the literacy coach position, central office and union leaders made three strategic decisions. The first was to seek candidates with both strong backgrounds in teaching reading and writing and good interpersonal skills suitable to the "coaching" role. The second decision was to post jobs as district office positions so that coaches could be selected based on their qualifications rather than by seniority provisions in the teachers' contract for in-school teacher leader appointments. The third was to set up a committee of principals and district officials to screen applications and interview candidates, to ensure a rigorous selection process. Literacy coaches were appointed in the spring of 2000.

District leaders determined that the literacy coaches would fail without extensive training. To facilitate training, the district hired the Institute for Learning (IFL). During the summer, the literacy coaches participated in an intensive training program with the IFL. The coaches were trained in both change process skills (e.g., Learning Walks) and instructional content.

Lead team teachers were another crucial component of the district's instructional support network. In the spring of 2000, elementary principals selected one lead team teacher per grade level to assist in the effort. Lead team teachers, trained by literacy coaches, were hired to help spread strong literacy practices throughout their schools. While the lead teachers received neither stipends nor workload adjustments, they did get access to additional in-service training assistance.

Restructuring the district's instructional capacity required changing district expenditures. By focusing existing funds on the literacy goals and seeking external funding from foundations, the superintendent acquired the financial support needed to implement the new plan. After a state waiver allowed class size reduction funds to pay elementary literacy coaches' salaries, the positions were funded by Providence's regular operating revenues. However, a lack of funding prevented middle and high school coaches from being selected until the second year of reform implementation.

While it was too early in the reform effort to know the full impact of literacy coaches, Providence elementary school teachers and principals praised the work of the literacy coaches and their potential to improve instruction.

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states and districts, there was a high level of communication between state and district leaders. In Rhode Island and Maryland, for example, the commissioners of education met monthly with superintendents from across their states. Those meetings were used as a forum to exchange ideas and address problems.

The role of the state in the Chula Vista and Minneapolis districts was mixed. While the two districts leveraged a significant amount of state resources to enhance their capacity-building efforts, almost unanimously leaders in these districts agreed that state policymakers did not operate as full partners. In both districts, leaders outlined counterproductive policies and practices from the legislature and the state department of education. While leaders in Kent County, Aldine, and Providence worked readily with state department leaders in shaping policies, Chula Vista and Minneapolis expressed a low level of communication and collaboration.

Despite those difficulties, both Chula Vista and Minneapolis used multiple state policies and programs to their advantage. For instance, in Minnesota, the state provided important compensatory funds to high-poverty schools. In addition, state policy mandated that districts set aside 2 percent of their budgets for professional development. In turn, Minneapolis required that 2 percent of school budgets be set aside for professional development. Interestingly, we observed that leaders of several turnaround schools in Minneapolis used compensatory funds to increase opportunities for teacher collaboration and training. The funds paid for teacher leaders, professional development materials, expert trainers, substitutes, and the like.

The story of Chula Vista helps to further explain the complicated role of the state in these districts. While Chula Vista leveraged a significant amount of state resources to enhance its professional development efforts, its leaders asserted that state policymakers did not focus on what they were best positioned to do. Explained one Chula Vista leader, "I think the state department spends too much time dealing with all of the elements of education when their main concern should be about results." In addition, leaders suggested that state policy and practice were at times counterproductive to their efforts. An administrator referred to the state accountability system as an example. "While the state system has introduced a level of accountability, they have selected an off-the-shelf, norm-referenced test that isn't aligned with standards. Only about 40 percent of the standards are reflected on the test."

Despite the district's ambivalence about the state's role, many Chula Vista schools relied heavily on state programs and state funds to enhance their professional development efforts. State influence was seen most heavily in the area of reading. Many of Chula Vista's high-poverty schools used a state-developed and -funded program, the Governor's Reading Initiative, commonly referred to as Results, as their primary reading focus. A majority of teachers in schools using the Results program took part in both summer and year-round training. The state funded both the training and stipends for teachers. In addition, some schools deemed "low performing" received state funds. These funds were used in large part for professional development needs. State grants also provided a significant resource for district-level professional development efforts, including resources to enhance the district's mentor program and to fully fund district specialists in math and reading.

Universities

Over the past two decades the term "school-university partnership" has become part of the language of school reform. Traditionally, universities

in these partnerships have worked with individual schools or a cluster of schools to provide professional development. Yet what we saw emerging in the study districts was a more strategic set of district-university partnerships. Rather than working with individual schools, universities collaborated at the system level to provide programmatic resources across the districts.

Because the study districts were savvy consumers of data, they had a deep sense of their weaknesses and needs. As a result, districts approached universities with a much keener sense of the scope of aid they needed and were able to leverage resources to support the collaboration. Conversely, when universities approached districts with a partnership idea, the central office was able to determine whether and how the university offering matched district needs.

The districts and universities worked together primarily in two areas—licensure and professional development. With licensure, universities worked at the system level to help districts fill gaps in their licensed teacher corps. As an example, two of the districts sought to increase the number of licensed minority teachers in their systems and worked collaboratively with local universities to develop intensive alternative certification programs for minority candidates. As another example, when the state of Minnesota increased licensure requirements for middle school teachers, the Minneapolis Public Schools determined that it would have a shortage of teachers certified to teach the middle grades. To mitigate the problem, the district and the University of Minnesota entered into a partnership to provide a specialized certification program. The district and the university shared the costs of instruction and credits and offered the program at no cost to current Minneapolis middle school teachers. The classes were arranged to fit into teacher schedules. Furthermore, curriculum was tailored to the district's needs.

Districts also worked closely with universities to address content and pedagogical needs. Some districts turned to universities for assistance in addressing weaknesses in literacy, math, science, and other disciplines. For example, when data revealed weaknesses in math, Aldine administrators supported an effort by Rice University to assist with training teachers throughout the system in math content and pedagogy.

While institutions of higher education increased their strategic work with districts, they were not yet engaged as systemic partners in instructional reform. Universities were generally not involved in the strategic planning efforts of districts. Neither were the districts readily engaging with universities regarding teacher preparation. This is particularly important, since stakeholders in all of the districts expressed concern that many new teachers were not well prepared in such areas as using data, integrating standards into instruction, and collaborating with peers on instructional matters. Without systematic engagement with higher education, these needs may remain unmet.

Parents

Districts adopted a range of practices to engage parents in instructional reform efforts. Many of the districts sought to involve parents at the outset of their reforms. In addition to bringing parents to the table in the vision development process, districts commissioned surveys to learn more about parent concerns and ideas. Furthermore, they sought to inform parents about reform measures through newsletters and forums.

In large measure, however, districts left parent engagement primarily to school-level staff. Schools included parents on leadership committees, distributed newsletters to parents, and conducted homework nights that included parents, children, and teachers. However, these efforts were generally not systematic, and dis-

tricts had not developed significant policies and practices related to parent involvement.

Indeed, despite the strong rhetorical commitment to parent involvement, most districts advanced their instructional reform efforts without the robust engagement of parents. District leaders acknowledged that engaging parents around day-to-day schooling issues remained a constant struggle, one that the districts had not adequately addressed. Some district leaders acknowledged that, early in their reform processes, they had concentrated their resources and energy primarily on improving instruction and had spent fewer resources engaging parents in the general reform effort.

V. Challenges to Districtwide Instructional Reform

Although the districts in the study have made significant strides toward their goals, they still face considerable challenges. While we do not attempt to address all of those challenges, we highlight a few significant ones that emerged across all districts:

- Old system structures do not easily support new approaches to professional development.
- High schools struggle to improve achievement.
- Finding funding to support new approaches to instructional improvement remains difficult.

Old system structures do not easily support new approaches to professional development. Our interviews suggested that leaders in the study districts expected school staff to take on more responsibility than ever before—to analyze data and diagnose student needs, to determine the efficacy of their own instruction, to research new practices, and to collaborate frequently with colleagues. Yet district leaders had not created the full complement of supports needed for teachers to meet these new expectations.

We saw clear attempts on the part of many teachers and schools to live up to these expectations. Many schools increased the level of collaborative opportunity—carving out an hour or two a week for shared work, for example. But it was not enough. Through our interviews and site visits, it appeared that only a limited number of schools had significantly overhauled the school day to provide time for teachers and principals to fit the demands of their jobs into their workdays. In many schools, much collaboration occurred during informal gatherings—in the hallways, at lunch breaks, or in between classes. Noted three teachers from Kent County in a dialogue about finding time for collaboration:

> ***TEACHER 1:*** People come early at our school and people stay late to do it whenever you can.
>
> ***TEACHER 2:*** You have to meet on the sly almost, just whenever you get a chance.
>
> ***TEACHER 3:*** You grab what time you can.
>
> ***TEACHER 2:*** You drop a note in the mailbox or send an e-mail to collaborate about lessons. The music teacher might ask me, "What decades or what years are you studying now so that we can...match up [social studies] with music?" Or the art teacher sends an e-mail to me, "What are you studying?" so that she can coordinate it. But it's done that way, drop a note in the mailbox, do it through e-mail.

In many schools, the culture of working together took root more quickly than did the structures to support it. Perhaps not surprisingly, the variance between the expectations placed on teachers and the structural supports to meet these expectations created great anxiety for many teachers in these systems. District leaders and teachers noted that both educators and policymakers must develop new models of support that allow teachers to engage in the type of instruction, data analysis, and collaboration demanded of them.

High schools struggle to improve achievement. By and large, the success of the districts in the study was confined to elementary schools. Throughout the six- to ten-year trajectories of their reforms, the districts focused heavily on

instructional improvement at the elementary grades, almost to the exclusion of the high schools. This appears to have been a deliberate effort in most districts to tackle a subset of their challenges. Thus it was not surprising to see student achievement gains peak in the elementary grades. By focusing on the earlier grades, districts created greater support for improvement at the elementary and middle school levels. As an example, in most districts, curriculum alignment was more complete in grades K–6 than in higher grades. This may be in part because the districts were more comfortable confronting challenges in the elementary grades, and in part because the state standards frameworks were more developed at the elementary level. In addition, it appeared that more resources were invested at the elementary level—particularly for math and literacy.

While all districts started with elementary reform, several districts were exploring new efforts at the high school level. Districts were approaching their high school reform in much the same way that they started their elementary efforts. They were reviewing data, identifying core challenges, assessing the research, visiting other districts to learn about exemplary practice, and making informed decisions. As high school reforms in most study districts began in 2000 or 2001, it is too soon to determine whether they will take hold.

Finding funding to support new approaches to instructional improvement remains difficult. As we have outlined throughout this report, the districts in this study engaged in a variety of innovative practices to improve instruction and instructional leadership. To bring such practices to life, the districts relied significantly on external state, federal, and private grant sources. Providence, for example, received multi-million-dollar grants from private foundations to help train a cadre of instructional coaches and teacher leaders to deliver its literacy reform. In Chula Vista, a three-year grant from the state allowed the district to increase the central office capacity and to hire a math instructional specialist to train teachers in math content and pedagogy. Districts in the study were savvy about finding additional funds to implement key programs. And it is in part this know-how that helped study districts to engage in professional development activities not seen in other districts.

However, while external resources provided districts with a powerful boost to their instructional improvement efforts, these resources presented a double-edged sword. On the one hand, without such resources the districts would have been unable to provide many of the professional growth opportunities that currently drive their reform efforts. On the other hand, the heavy reliance on such funds presented considerable constraints. Obtaining such resources created a significant drain on human labor in some of the districts. In addition, such monies at times came with strings that shifted the focus of carefully considered reform efforts. The districts' heavy reliance on short-term grants to fuel professional development also challenged the sustainability of these efforts.

VI. Ten Lessons Learned

At a time when districts nationwide face enormous pressure to raise achievement for all students, particularly those who have traditionally lagged behind their peers, educators and policymakers are eager for ideas. The work of the five districts in this study offers 10 important lessons for those seeking to improve instruction and student achievement.

LESSON 1: *Districts can make a difference.* If as a nation we are serious about improving achievement for all students, we cannot expect the staffs of each of the nation's approximately 95,000 public schools to figure out how to do this work on their own. As these five districts demonstrate, school districts play an essential role in providing a coherent instructional framework to help schools, particularly low-performing schools, succeed.

LESSON 2: *Let truth be heard.* These districts created a climate for change where it was safe to acknowledge poor performance and safe to seek solutions. They reviewed their data and publicly acknowledged the need for improvement. Leaders neither made excuses for poor achievement nor wasted time placing blame. Rather, they accepted the challenge of educating high-poverty children and made sure that superintendents, principals, and other leaders shared this goal.

LESSON 3: *Focus on instruction to improve student achievement.* It is basic: students learn what they are taught; students will learn more if they are taught well. Yet so often reform efforts look at everything except how to help teachers help their students learn. In these districts, reforms focused on improving instruction, and this approach is paying off.

LESSON 4: *Improving instruction requires a coherent, systemwide approach.* To help all schools improve achievement, district leaders created a framework of supports with several critical parts. They established a clear vision that focused teachers and administrators on improving instruction. Districts then specified the outcomes expected for students and schools; they created districtwide curricula to help teachers know what to teach; they used data at every level to inform their work, and they created a coherent set of strategies to support and improve instruction.

LESSON 5: *Make decisions based on good data.* These districts used multiple—not single—measures of student and school performance to gauge progress and inform instruction. Moreover, they helped teachers and administrators learn to use the data effectively.

LESSON 6: *Rethink professional development.* These districts abolished traditional and ineffective approaches to teacher training and replaced them with research-based strategies to improve teacher and principal skills. They used student performance data to guide what teachers needed to learn and created cadres of principal and teacher leaders to provide quality instructional guidance.

LESSON 7: *Everyone has a role to play in improving instruction.* No single stakeholder was expected to lead instructional reform. Leadership was shared across the system, and stakeholders generally took on the lead-

ership roles for which they were best suited. School boards focused primarily on developing policies to support instructional reform. Central office staff worked to support schools; they provided significant supports to principals to become instructional leaders, they built and financed networks of teacher leaders, and they facilitated structures that encouraged collaboration. Principals guided their staffs to assess challenges and improve practice, and teacher leaders provided instructional support and coherence.

LESSON 8: *Working together takes work.* The expansion of leadership required significant collaboration among stakeholders. Simply getting along was not the goal; leaders determined that amity held little value if it did not create positive change for children. Led by the efforts of their boards and superintendents, the most collaborative districts in the study worked on working together. Districts deliberately sought and implemented tools to guide collaboration. To be sure, not all of these districts involved all of the stakeholders to the same degree, but the record so far suggests that the collaboration of important stakeholders is vital to school improvement.

LESSON 9: *There are no quick fixes.* Leaders in these districts recognized that success would take time and that they would have to stick with their efforts for the long haul. District leaders encouraged practitioners to try new ideas and did not expect immediate results. Board leaders supported superintendents over many years and many initiatives. Leaders assessed the impact of their efforts and made adjustments along the route.

LESSON 10: *Current structures and funding limit success.* Current district and school structures do not fully provide the time and supports necessary for systemwide instructional improvement. Moreover, these districts' heavy reliance on external and short-term funding to support their efforts puts their continued success in jeopardy—and raises questions about how many other districts can follow in their path.

Although some may seem commonsensical, these lessons are important because they are not being applied systemically in our nation. As these districts illustrate, when these lessons are applied, improvement in high-poverty school systems is possible. These districts earned their good results. While the districts have not figured out all the answers, they show that when districts support schools and plan carefully and collaboratively, they can translate their visions into improvement—for their communities, their leaders, their teachers, their parents, and, most important, their students.

For the Learning First Alliance, these lessons are not academic. They lead to an action agenda for the future. On the basis of these lessons, the Learning First Alliance has adopted a set of recommendations directed to all those involved in improving our nation's public schools.

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VII. Recommendations

We have outlined recommendations to help all partners in education address instructional reform.

1. **Mobilize political will to improve instruction across the district; engage everyone for the long haul.**
   - A. Use student achievement data to galvanize political will.
   - B. Recognize that improving instruction is essential; create top-level support for instruction among board members, superintendents, and community and parent leaders.
   - C. Allow for innovation that may not show immediate results.

2. **Implement a systemwide approach to improving instruction that specifies the outcomes to be expected, the content to be taught, the data to inform the work, and the supports to be provided.**
   - A. Develop a clear and concrete vision for improving instruction districtwide, and use it to guide decisionmaking at all levels of the system.
   - B. Provide curricular guidance to help teachers know what to teach.
   - C. Use data to assess needs, guide decisionmaking, and measure improvement.
     - Create multimeasure accountability systems that specify desired student and school outcomes.
     - Provide usable data to stakeholders.
     - Train stakeholders to use data effectively.
   - D. Make professional development relevant and useful.
   - E. Align human, financial, and other resources with instructional priorities.
   - F. Be a savvy and active consumer of the best available research and expertise.

3. **Make professional development relevant and useful.**
   - A. Agree on and use research-based principles to guide professional development.
   - B. Eliminate inefficient single-workshop approaches to professional development.
   - C. Create a robust corps of teachers and principals who are instructional leaders.
   - D. Use data and research to guide professional development content.
   - E. Create support systems for new teachers.

4. **Redefine school and district leadership roles.**
   - A. Work together to ensure that stakeholders—boards, central offices, unions, principals, teachers and teacher leaders, universities, and parent and community leaders—are engaging in the roles that they are best positioned to lead.
   - B. Build a network of instructional expertise, including a strong corps of principals and teachers as instructional leaders.
   - C. Focus the central office on developing a systemwide framework to support instruction.
   - D. Within a clearly defined district framework, allow schools the flexibility to make decisions based on data and to allocate resources as needed to address goals and challenges.

5. **Explore ways to restructure the traditional school day and year.**

   Provide adequate time and supports for teachers and principals to carry out the new vision for their work and instructional improvement.

6. **Attend to funding.**

   Make funding for new approaches to professional development central to district budgets, and call for dependable state and federal funding for this essential work.

Recommendations for Individual Stakeholders

These six recommendations have important implications for everyone with a stake in improving instruction and achievement. Doing the hard work of districtwide improvement requires all stakeholders to step forward and lead where they are best positioned to lead. As a beginning step, the Alliance urges stakeholders to consider the following:

School Boards

1. Maintain the district focus on improving instruction and achievement.
2. Work collaboratively with the central office, union, and other leaders (1) to frame and implement a district vision focused on instruction and achievement and (2) to adopt and use research-based principles regarding effective teaching and effective professional development.
3. Use data to regularly monitor the efficacy of the school system. Hold yourselves and the central office responsible for results. When results are disappointing, seek solutions rather than assigning blame.
4. Hire top-level leaders—a superintendent and deputy superintendent—who will lead instructional improvement and will make decisions based on instructional and academic needs.
5. Set clear, coherent policies that support better instruction. Avoid involvement in day-to-day decisionmaking that constrains the operation of the district.
6. Recognize that improving instruction and student achievement is an ongoing process. Allow for innovation that may not show immediate results.

Superintendents/Central Office

1. Work collaboratively with the board, union, and other leaders (1) to frame and implement a district vision focused on instruction and achievement and (2) to adopt and use research-based principles regarding effective teaching and effective professional development.
2. Help to ensure adequate resources for district needs.
3. Make improving instruction and achievement the guide for decisionmaking and budgeting.
4. Inspire and encourage leadership at all levels of the system. Collaborate with leaders across the district. Meet regularly with union leaders to address concerns and instructional issues. Create structures that bring together principals from across the district to collaborate regularly on improving instruction.
5. Take a systems approach to improving instruction and achievement, and align core system components to support one another.
   - Provide clear curricular guidance to help teachers know what to teach.
   - Expect principals to be instructional leaders, and provide significant training and support to help them reach that ideal.
   - Foster networks of teacher leaders at the district and school levels who provide instructional assistance to other teachers and leaders.
   - Use research-based principles to guide professional development.
6. Assess the needs of teachers in the district using teacher survey data, attrition rates, achievement data, and other information. Propose and collaborate on strategies that address these needs, such as induction programs, provision of differentiated professional development for veteran teachers, and development of teacher leaders.

Union Leaders

1. Work collaboratively with the central office, board, and other leaders (1) to frame and implement a district vision focused on instruction and achievement and (2) to adopt and use research-based principles regarding effective teaching and effective professional development.
2. Advocate for a system of teacher leaders that can provide needed supports to classroom teachers.
3. Assess the needs of teachers in the district using teacher survey data, attrition rates, achievement data, and other information. Propose and collaborate on strategies that address these needs, such as induction programs, provision of differentiated professional development for veteran teachers, and development of teacher leaders.
4. Negotiate for contracts that support high-quality professional development, such as building career ladders for teacher leaders and creating strong induction programs.

Principals

1. Continually improve your skills in using data, observing instructional practice, providing instructional feedback, motivating teachers, and so forth. Work with colleagues to advocate for greater district-level supports and training.
2. Foster professional learning communities so that teachers work and learn together as part of their regular practice. Encourage teachers to engage in research-based professional development.
3. Use your resources to create teacher leader positions and employ teacher leaders to extend instructional support in the school. Advocate for central office support for teacher leaders through district funds and contracts.
4. Make improving instruction and achievement the guide for decisionmaking and budgeting.
5. Support new teachers and act as a champion at the school and district levels for effective induction practices.

Parent Leaders

1. Demand data regarding student performance, curriculum quality, teacher qualifications, the quality of instruction, fund allocation, and strategies to improve achievement.
2. Build parent and community support for instructional reform. Help parents understand reform in the district, the importance of instruction, and the relationship between instructional improvement and student achievement.
3. Learn about why teachers need ongoing on-the-job professional development to improve student achievement, and work with parents to support it. Support policies such as early-release time or additional funds to build the instructional skills of teachers and leaders.
4. Actively support school board candidates who will sustain the district focus on improving achievement and instruction.

Universities

1. Aggressively pursue opportunities to be an effective long-term partner in the design, development, implementation, and evaluation of the district's professional development plan.
2. Ensure that teacher candidates are prepared to teach in high-poverty school districts. Candidates should receive the training they need to use data effectively, to work successfully with parents and peers, to meet the learning needs of diverse students, and to teach in standards-based and assessment-driven schools.
3. Ensure that aspiring administrators are prepared to design and implement research-based, systemwide approaches to improve instruction.
4. Revise promotion and tenure policies to support effective district partnerships.

State Departments and State Boards of Education

1. Recognize and support the pivotal role that districts play in creating success across all schools. Ensure that state policies do not circumvent the district. Engage district leaders in developing and implementing state policies and programs. Deliver technical training on a districtwide scale instead of focusing on individual schools.
2. Support district efforts to align standards, assessment, curriculum, and professional development.
3. Support instructional leadership and high-quality professional development across school systems. Allocate the time, policy supports, and funding to support research-based professional development.
4. Encourage districts to use multiple data measures to gauge student success. Model the use of multiple measures for decisionmaking at the state level.
5. Provide student performance and other data to districts in a manner that allows districts to use them effectively for instructional improvement. Work closely with districts to determine how they use data and how better to respond to their needs.
6. Help build district capacity and expand leaders' opportunities to learn from each other. Highlight improving districts and the lessons that can be learned from them. Bring district leaders together to share ideas.

Next Steps for the Learning First Alliance

To ensure that the implications of this report and our recommendations are understood and implemented, the Learning First Alliance and its members will undertake the following actions:

1. Disseminate the findings and recommendations of this report broadly to educators, policymakers, parents, and the public.
2. Consider the implications of the report for each organization's work and policies.
3. Encourage school districts and states to use the report for learning, reflection, and action. To accomplish this, the Learning First Alliance will share the findings and recommendations with superintendents, school board members, principals, union leaders, parent leaders, university deans of education, chief state school officers, governors, and state school board members. We will develop tools to assist stakeholders in considering the implications of this report. In addition, we will partner with interested Learning First Alliance partner states to convene state policy roundtables for this purpose.
4. Build greater understanding of new approaches to professional development and address the ways that stakeholders will have to work differently to improve instruction. As part of this effort, we will identify the implications of this report for specific stakeholders, such as principals, board members, colleges of education, and state policymakers.
5. Address key challenges identified in the report:
   - Advocate at the federal, state, and local levels for sustainable funding to create coherent systems of instructional supports such as those identified in this study.
   - Examine in greater depth the challenges created by attempting to carry out new professional development practices within the current school structures. Acknowledge and address the fact that current practice does not provide adequate opportunity for teachers and principals to carry out the new demands of their work—to analyze data and diagnose student needs, to determine the efficacy of their own practice, to align their instruction to new curriculum standards, and to collaborate regularly with peers.
6. Synthesize existing research on districtwide reform to make such information accessible to practitioners and policymakers.
7. Call for high-quality research to answer important questions that practitioners and policymakers wrestle with as they seek districtwide success:
   - *Time and structures for instructional improvement.* What are the underlying reasons why schools struggle to build structures and find time to implement new principles of professional development? How are schools and districts using time and resources differently to create structures that allow for the new kind of professional development outlined in this report?
   - *Continuity of leadership.* What strategies are districts using to create and sustain effective instructional leadership? What are the most significant barriers to sustaining instructionally focused leaders at the board and central office levels? How are community and parent leaders involved in sustaining board and central office leaders?
   - *Funding.* Given the highly complex and robust set of instructional supports needed to improve instruction systemwide,

how much does it really cost to enact districtwide instructional reform? What are the most cost-effective ways of training leaders and providing ongoing teacher training? Are some components of instructional reform more essential and cost-effective than others? To what extent does current state and local funding cover the cost of research-based professional development?

- *Measuring changes in instructional practice.* How can districts hold principals, teachers, and administrators accountable for high-quality instructional practice? To what extent are teachers changing instructional practices as a result of new approaches to professional development? Which tools could help districts measure the impact of professional development on instructional practice and instructional leadership?
- *Curriculum rigor and alignment to state standards.* Given the variability of the rigor and quality of state standards and assessments, what are effective strategies for districts in states with low-level or narrow standards and/or assessments to ensure high-level curricular content?
- *High versus low capacity.* Strategies for instructional reform are not universally suited to all schools and districts; some have a greater capacity to carry out complex reform than others. To what extent are districts assessing the capacity of their schools and themselves before implementing instructional reform? Are some approaches to large-scale instructional improvement better suited to high-capacity districts than to low-capacity districts, and vice versa?
- *Middle and high school success.* What needs to happen for district reforms to progress not only at the elementary school level but also at the middle and high school levels?
- *Addressing the needs of the whole child.* As districts engage in systemwide instructional improvement, how can they effectively integrate approaches to helping children grow socially, emotionally, and ethically as well as academically?

Appendix I Methodology

District Selection

The investigation discussed in this report involved a comparative case study of five school districts. Districts were selected according to primary and secondary criteria. In applying our primary criteria, we sought districts that exhibited:

- Success in increasing student achievement in math or reading over three or more years
- Improvement in student achievement across grade levels and ethnicities
- A poverty rate of at least 25 percent, as defined by students eligible for free or reduced lunch
- A reputation for effective professional development practices, based on recommendations from education leaders

In addition to the primary criteria, districts were selected according to a mix of demographic factors, including size, geographic distribution, state policy frameworks, union affiliation, and the extent to which they had already been studied.

We solicited district recommendations from Learning First Alliance member organizations, education researchers, and nonprofit leaders. We received over 50 recommendations of districts and conducted a careful review of district achievement data. Standardized test data were the primary sources of achievement data used. On the basis of data, 14 districts emerged as potential study sites. Using the secondary criteria, we chose five of those districts for study.

Data Gathering and Analysis

We gathered data during two visits to each district (except Providence) over the course of the academic year 2001–2002. The first site visits (three days), which were conducted from November 2001 through January 2002 by a team of four researchers from the University of Toronto and the Learning First Alliance, served as the primary data-gathering exercise. In the spring of 2002, a larger team of senior staff and board members from Learning First Alliance member organizations conducted a second round of site visits (two days). Providence was not visited in the second round because of scheduling difficulties. Learning First Alliance research staff attended all nine site visits. Two members of the University of Toronto faculty participated in each first-round site visit. One member participated in the second round of visits. Six kinds of data were gathered prior to and during these visits.

1. *Interview data.* During the first site visit, the research team conducted approximately 35 individual semistructured interviews in each district (176 total) with education stakeholders, including teachers, union leaders, central office staff, board members, teacher leaders, principals, university partners, community leaders, and parents. The Learning First Alliance senior staff and research team members conducted 31 follow-up interviews with a similar set of stakeholders during the second site visit.

   In addition, the research team conducted interviews with state-level education stakeholders, including the commissioners of

education from four states, state legislators, state board of education members, state department of education staff, and executive directors of state alliance organizations.

2. *Focus groups.* Focus groups were conducted during both site visits. A total of 63 focus groups were convened (10–15 per district). Focus groups were used to gain feedback from stakeholder groups with larger numbers of staff, such as teachers, principals, and community members. Focus groups with teacher mentors, instructional coaches/teacher leaders, principals from turnaround schools, and the like were used to gain deeper information about specific instructional reform efforts or professional development innovations.
3. *Observations.* Nonparticipant observations were conducted during the first site visit. The research team attended professional development workshops, principal trainings, grade-level meetings, board meetings, and other meetings related to professional development and the implementation of innovations.
4. *School site visits.* During both phases of the study, the research teams visited three schools per district, ensuring a mix of elementary, middle, and secondary schools where feasible. The school site visit design included an interview with the principal, two interviews with teachers, and a school walkthrough.
5. *Documentation.* From each district we gathered a series of documents to bolster our interview and observational data. We gathered both district- and school-based documents, such as strategic plans, union contracts, budgets, curricular frameworks, professional development guidelines and activities, achievement data, accountability reports, and professional development tools.
6. *Field notes.* Each member of the site visit team from the first and second site visit completed a formal observational memo that outlined information about stakeholder interactions, stakeholder roles in instructional reform, and other general observations.

All interviews and focus groups were taped. Given the volume of interviews and focus groups and limited resources, researchers used a combination of verbatim transcription and summarization to create a written record of the interviews. All focus groups were transcribed. On the basis of the study questions and an original conceptual framework, a coding scheme was designed for the data and a thematic outline was developed to guide case study writing. Interview data were coded and entered into nud*st. On the basis of a combination of interview transcript review, nud*st thematic reports, field notes, and documentation, case studies were written for each district. Multiple members of the research team participated in the analysis and drafting of each case study. Once written, the case studies became data used to inform the analysis for the cross-case analysis report. Drafts of the case studies were provided to the districts to cross-check the accuracy of the factual data.

Appendix II District Achievement Data

Table A.1. Aldine Independent School District 60
Table A.2. Aldine Independent School District 62
Table A.3. Chula Vista Elementary School District 64
Table A.4. Chula Vista Elementary School District 65
Table A.5. Kent County Public Schools 66
Table A.6. Kent County Public Schools 66
Table A.7. Minneapolis Public Schools 68
Table A.8. Minneapolis Public Schools 68
Table A.9. Minneapolis Public Schools 69
Table A.10. Providence Public Schools 69
Table A.11. Providence Public Schools 70

Table A.1 Aldine Independent School District

Percentage of Students Meeting Minimum Expectations on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS)—Reading—1994–2002

	1994	1995	1996	1997
READING, Grade 3				
Asian	NA	95	90	95
African American	67	77	66	79
Hispanic	78	89	88	91
White	85	87	93	91
READING, Grade 4				
Asian	NA	90	92	94
African American	68	76	70	79
Hispanic	78	88	87	93
White	86	91	91	95
READING, Grade 5				
Asian	NA	91	97	96
African American	65	71	75	81
Hispanic	74	78	87	89
White	84	88	92	95
READING, Grade 6				
Asian	NA	86	90	95
African American	59	77	76	88
Hispanic	68	79	76	86
White	81	91	91	96
READING, Grade 7				
Asian	NA	90	93	93
African American	64	68	78	84
Hispanic	68	76	80	84
White	86	90	90	94
READING, Grade 8				
Asian	NA	83	80	96
African American	68	67	69	81
Hispanic	69	75	72	83
White	88	86	90	94
READING, Grade 10				
Asian	NA	72	83	86
African American	65	63	74	82
Hispanic	64	69	68	75
White	88	88	91	94

1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	Total % Change
97	89	91	90	93	–2
83	83	83	81	86	19
86	89	87	86	89	11
92	92	92	91	94	9
98	93	91	96	98	8
88	86	86	89	92	24
95	89	89	91	95	17
96	92	93	95	96	10
98	92	92	95	91	0
88	77	80	88	86	21
91	81	83	90	91	17
93	92	95	93	96	12
92	93	95	93	99	13
89	85	87	84	86	27
85	84	88	87	89	21
95	91	94	93	95	14
92	76	89	95	99	9
83	81	79	86	91	27
85	84	81	90	93	25
94	92	92	95	98	12
90	95	96	98	99	16
87	88	90	92	94	26
84	90	91	93	96	27
95	95	96	93	96	8
80	87	94	90	93	21
85	85	89	89	95	30
80	83	90	87	92	28
95	95	95	96	96	8

Notes: NA = Not applicable. In order to meet minimum expectations, a student must answer at least 70 percent of the test questions correctly.

Source: These data were provided by the Aldine Independent School District.

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Table A.2 Aldine Independent School District

Percentage of Students Meeting Minimum Expectations on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS)—Mathematics—1994–2002

	1994	1995	1996	1997
MATHEMATICS, Grade 3				
Asian	NA	95	96	99
African American	56	73	68	84
Hispanic	71	84	86	94
White	77	84	92	94
MATHEMATICS, Grade 4				
Asian	NA	96	97	96
African American	49	61	68	81
Hispanic	71	80	89	93
White	77	83	89	95
MATHEMATICS, Grade 5				
Asian	NA	87	97	97
African American	59	52	62	78
Hispanic	68	70	85	93
White	81	80	87	93
MATHEMATICS, Grade 6				
Asian	NA	83	93	96
African American	40	46	73	81
Hispanic	53	58	81	85
White	70	79	90	94
MATHEMATICS, Grade 7				
Asian	NA	80	92	97
African American	40	40	55	73
Hispanic	47	53	63	82
White	69	74	86	94
MATHEMATICS, Grade 8				
Asian	NA	78	84	98
African American	39	37	53	71
Hispanic	47	45	63	79
White	72	73	80	90
MATHEMATICS, Grade 10				
Asian	NA	75	83	89
African American	33	40	45	61
Hispanic	45	50	54	65
White	67	73	76	90

1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	Total % Change
98	96	97	95	97	2
79	77	73	80	86	30
86	87	85	89	93	22
94	89	87	90	95	18
98	99	96	99	100	4
83	86	87	89	95	46
94	92	91	95	97	26
96	95	93	96	98	21
99	99	100	99	97	10
83	82	85	90	91	32
93	90	91	94	96	28
94	92	94	96	98	17
98	98	98	100	99	16
87	84	85	89	93	53
91	89	91	94	96	43
96	92	92	96	96	26
93	98	96	99	99	19
75	81	84	88	91	51
83	89	92	94	95	48
93	92	93	94	98	29
96	99	100	100	100	22
84	82	88	90	90	51
85	89	94	95	96	49
95	95	96	95	95	23
87	92	97	98	100	25
69	70	82	87	90	57
76	82	90	91	96	51
92	92	94	99	95	28

Notes: NA = Not applicable. In order to meet minimum expectations, a student must answer at least 70 percent of the test questions correctly.

Source: These data were provided by the Aldine Independent School District.

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Table A.3 Chula Vista Elementary School District

Percentage of Students Scoring at or above the 50th Percentile on the Stanford 9—Reading—1999–2002

	1999	2000	2001	2002	Total % Change
READING, Grade 2					
Asian	67	66	70	71	4
Filipino	71	64	75	81	10
White	59	62	67	67	8
Hispanic	28	33	41	39	11
African American	39	39	43	51	12
READING, Grade 3					
Asian	51	53	54	65	14
Filipino	63	68	63	69	6
White	59	65	67	65	6
Hispanic	27	27	33	36	9
African American	36	42	41	42	6
READING, Grade 4					
Asian	53	59	63	71	18
Filipino	61	64	72	72	11
White	60	63	67	69	9
Hispanic	29	29	34	36	7
African American	36	36	48	42	6
READING, Grade 5					
Asian	58	52	60	59	1
Filipino	58	52	71	71	13
White	60	59	68	71	11
Hispanic	31	30	32	35	4
African American	36	43	46	50	14
READING, Grade 6					
Asian	61	64	63	59	–2
Filipino	67	66	73	74	7
White	65	64	67	69	4
Hispanic	34	35	39	35	1
African American	45	36	45	52	7

Notes: Chula Vista was originally selected based on disaggregated data from 1998–2000. Due to changes in the state's methods for disaggregating data, data prior to 1999 are no longer used.

Source: These data were provided by the Chula Vista Elementary School District.

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Table A.4 Chula Vista Elementary School District

Percentage of Students Scoring at or above the 50th Percentile on the Stanford 9—Mathematics—1999–2002

	1999	2000	2001	2002	Total % Change
MATHEMATICS, Grade 2					
Asian	77	85	90	89	12
Filipino	73	71	84	85	12
White	64	74	75	77	13
Hispanic	37	51	55	55	18
African American	45	52	51	59	14
MATHEMATICS, Grade 3					
Asian	80	84	85	92	12
Filipino	74	78	82	85	11
White	65	77	76	77	12
Hispanic	37	47	56	54	17
African American	36	59	56	52	16
MATHEMATICS, Grade 4					
Asian	74	83	85	85	11
Filipino	66	77	80	82	16
White	61	69	76	73	12
Hispanic	38	44	50	49	11
African American	36	39	53	49	13
MATHEMATICS, Grade 5					
Asian	78	75	85	84	6
Filipino	70	75	82	81	11
White	64	65	76	77	13
Hispanic	39	46	50	50	11
African American	33	44	52	60	27
MATHEMATICS, Grade 6					
Asian	84	88	91	93	9
Filipino	76	80	87	87	11
White	69	72	77	81	12
Hispanic	45	52	58	58	13
African American	49	48	56	62	13

Notes: Chula Vista was originally selected based on disaggregated data from 1998–2000. Due to changes in the state's methods for disaggregating data, data prior to 1999 are no longer used.

Source: These data were provided by the Chula Vista Elementary School District.

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Table A.5 Kent County Public Schools

Percentage of Students Scoring Satisfactory or Higher on the Maryland School Performance Assessment Program (MSPAP)—Reading—1994–2002

	1994	1995	1996	1997
READING, Grade 3				
African American	22	21	26	25
White/non-Hispanic	52	46	55	54
READING, Grade 5				
African American	12	6	31	20
White/non-Hispanic	40	28	48	43
READING, Grade 8				
African American	15	6	38	16
White/non-Hispanic	35	28	35	40

Table A.6 Kent County Public Schools

Percentage of Students Scoring Satisfactory or Higher on the Maryland School Performance Assessment Program (MSPAP)—Mathematics—1994–2002

	1994	1995	1996	1997
MATHEMATICS, Grade 3				
African American	36	32	36	40
White/non-Hispanic	58	66	65	80
MATHEMATICS, Grade 5				
African American	15	9	44	22
White/non-Hispanic	45	44	68	65
MATHEMATICS, Grade 8				
African American	21	14	51	18
White/non-Hispanic	62	60	64	68

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1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	Total % Change
49	62	60	55	39	17
69	75	72	57	54	2
27	30	29	28	41	27
51	57	58	63	51	11
10	17	25	29	28	13
38	38	43	50	39	4

Notes: Due to reasons of privacy (n < 5), data are not represented for Hispanic and Asian students. Kent County's scores in 2001 and 2002 show a decline that is reflective of a broader statewide decline in MSPAP scores.

Source: These data were provided by the Kent County Public Schools.

1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	Total % Change
76	71	70	46	44	8
81	95	90	77	67	9
21	25	24	16	19	4
58	69	59	51	49	4
29	30	42	29	27	6
69	75	75	73	63	1

Notes: Due to reasons of privacy (n < 5), data are not represented for Hispanic and Asian students. Kent County's scores in 2001 and 2002 show a decline that is reflective of a broader statewide decline in MSPAP scores.

Source: These data were provided by the Kent County Public Schools.

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Table A.7 Minneapolis Public Schools

Percentage of Students Scoring at or above Level IIb on the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment—Reading—1998–2002

	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	Total % Change
READING, Grade 3						
American Indian	21	23	29	34	41	20
Asian/Pacific Islander	13	17	15	30	29	16
Hispanic	22	26	24	24	24	2
Black	16	18	21	30	28	12
White	60	63	68	73	74	14
READING, Grade 5						
American Indian	15	19	29	41	41	26
Asian/Pacific Islander	18	21	22	29	32	14
Hispanic	18	20	28	31	30	12
Black	14	18	26	31	33	19
White	60	62	70	79	80	20

Notes: Most students in Level IIb are working successfully on grade-level material and are on track to achieve satisfactory work in the state's content standards. Minneapolis was selected based on achievement data from grades K–8, the grades on which district-level reform had focused thus far. The district began high school reform efforts in 2001–2002.

Source: These data were provided by the Minneapolis Public Schools.

Table A.8 Minneapolis Public Schools

Percentage of Students Scoring at or above Level IIb on the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment—Mathematics—1998–2002

	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	Total % Change
MATHEMATICS, Grade 3						
American Indian	22	25	39	35	38	16
Asian/Pacific Islander	19	28	34	41	44	25
Hispanic	17	30	30	25	31	14
Black	13	17	24	28	28	15
White	58	67	72	72	73	15
MATHEMATICS, Grade 5						
American Indian	14	16	26	31	40	26
Asian/Pacific Islander	19	25	29	34	45	26
Hispanic	14	16	25	34	30	16
Black	8	11	19	22	30	22
White	54	58	67	74	78	24

Notes: Most students in Level IIb are working successfully on grade-level material and are on track to achieve satisfactory work in the state's content standards. Minneapolis was selected based on achievement data from grades K–8, the grades on which district-level reform had focused thus far. The district began high school reform efforts in 2001–2002.

Source: These data were provided by the Minneapolis Public Schools.

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Table A.9 Minneapolis Public Schools

Percentage of Students Passing the Basic Skills Test—Reading and Mathematics—1998–2002

	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	Total % Change
READING, Grade 8						
American Indian	26	45	53	46	42	16
Asian/Pacific Islander	33	39	52	43	46	13
Hispanic	24	39	38	38	38	14
Black	24	30	42	37	40	16
White	73	78	84	83	85	12
MATHEMATICS, Grade 8						
American Indian	29	32	41	32	44	15
Asian/Pacific Islander	39	45	55	50	57	18
Hispanic	21	27	29	32	33	12
Black	21	20	25	22	30	9
White	73	75	75	74	79	6

Notes: Minneapolis was selected based on achievement data from grades K–8, the grades on which district-level reform had focused thus far. The district began high school reform efforts in 2001–2002.

Source: These data were provided by the Minneapolis Public Schools.

Table A.10 Providence Public Schools

Percentage of Students Who Met or Exceeded the Standard on the New Standards English Language Arts Reference Exam—1998–2002

	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	Total % Change
Grade 4						
All students	35	53	57	44	47	12
Grade 8						
All students	24	22	25	27	23	–1

Notes: As Providence had focused its reform efforts on the elementary grades, the district was selected based on data that revealed improvement in elementary school students' reading scores from 1998 to 2000 (e.g., according to the originally provided data, the percentage of fourth-grade black students who met or exceeded the standard on the English Language Arts Reference Exam increased from 28% to 42%, and Hispanic student achievement increased from 21% to 37%). These disaggregated data were provided by the Rhode Island State Department of Education. However, due to changes in the state's methods for disaggregating data, the original data we received have been withdrawn from public access. Therefore, we print here the aggregate data provided by the Providence Public Schools. The district began to disaggregate its own data again in 2002.

Source: These data were provided by the Providence Public Schools.

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Table A.11 Providence Public Schools

Percentage of Students Who Met or Exceeded the Standard on the New Standards Mathematics Reference Exam—1998–2002

	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	Total % Change
Grade 4						
All students	24	26	34	58	35	11
Grade 8						
All students	23	27	26	13	18	–5

Notes: As Providence had focused its reform efforts on the elementary grades, the district was selected based on data that revealed improvement in elementary school students' reading scores from 1998 to 2000 (e.g., according to the originally provided data, the percentage of fourth-grade black students who met or exceeded the standard on the English Language Arts Reference Exam increased from 28% to 42%, and Hispanic student achievement increased from 21% to 37%). These disaggregated data were provided by the Rhode Island State Department of Education. However, due to changes in the state's methods for disaggregating data, the original data we received have been withdrawn from public access. Therefore, we print here the aggregate data provided by the Providence Public Schools. The district began to disaggregate its own data again in 2002.

Source: These data were provided by the Providence Public Schools.

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About the Learning First Alliance

The Learning First Alliance, founded in 1997, is a permanent partnership of 12 leading educational associations that have come together to improve student learning in America's public elementary and secondary schools. Members of the Alliance represent more than 10 million Americans engaged in providing, governing, and improving public education.

Alliance members are committed to developing and delivering common messages to all parts of the education system, sharing and disseminating success stories, encouraging collaboration at every level, and working toward the continual and long-term improvement of public education based on solid research.

The three major goals of the Learning First Alliance are to:

1. Ensure that high academic expectations are held for all students
2. Ensure a safe and supportive place of learning for all students
3. Engage parents and other community members in helping students achieve high academic expectations

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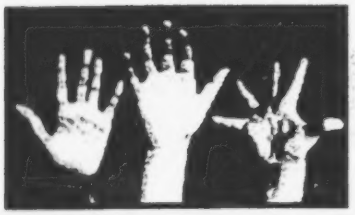
The Learning First Alliance is composed of the following organizations:

American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education
American Association of School Administrators
American Federation of Teachers
Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development
Council of Chief State School Officers
Education Commission of the States
National Association of Elementary School Principals
National Association of Secondary School Principals
National Association of State Boards of Education
National Education Association
National PTA
National School Boards Association

LEARNING FIRST ALLIANCE

BEYOND ISLANDS OF EXCELLENCE:

What Districts Can Do to Improve Instruction and Achievement in All Schools— A Leadership Brief



LEARNING **FIRST** ALLIANCE

BEYOND ISLANDS OF EXCELLENCE:

What Districts Can Do to Improve Instruction and Achievement in All Schools—A Leadership Brief

Learning First Alliance

March 2003

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Wendy Togneri, Learning First Alliance

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Printed in the United States of America.

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Development and production of these reports were supported by grants from the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation and from the Office of Educational Research & Improvement, U.S. Department of Education. The findings and conclusions presented in this report do not necessarily represent the official positions or policies of the Office of Educational Research & Improvement, U.S. Department of Education (grant no. R215U000007-01) or the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation.

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Moving Beyond Islands of Excellence

Heroic principals who turn around low-performing schools, innovative charter schools that break established molds, inspiring teachers who motivate students to excel—those are the familiar prescriptions for improving student achievement in high-poverty schools. While such efforts may mean brighter educational futures for the children involved, they produce isolated islands of excellence.

Our nation has a moral imperative to close the achievement gap between low-income students and their more advantaged peers. The No Child Left Behind Act makes this a legal requirement as well. Yet improving learning opportunities for all children will require more than individual talents or school-by-school efforts. It will demand systemwide approaches that touch every child in every school in every district across the nation.

The Learning First Alliance calls for policymakers, practitioners, and the public to accept the challenge of improving student achievement across entire school systems. We believe that substantial gains will result only if we recognize that, to increase student achievement, we must improve instruction and commit the political will and resources necessary to develop districtwide solutions. As a permanent partnership of organizations representing parents, teachers, principals, administrators, local and state boards of education, and colleges of education, the Learning First Alliance recognizes that such improvements will require both individual and collective action. Without efforts to create success across school systems, far too many students will continue to languish. We find that unacceptable.

Moving beyond islands of excellent schools to systems of success will require that all those involved in education better understand what they must do to help students succeed. State leaders need greater knowledge about where to target resources and how to set policies to support entire school systems. District-level educators—board members, superintendents, union leaders, principals, and teachers—need guidance about policies and practices that will improve instruction. And community members and parents need good ideas about how most effectively to support high-quality teaching and learning.

To address the need for better information, the Alliance studied five high-poverty districts making strides in improving student achievement. Recognizing that effective instruction is crucial to improving achievement, we were interested in learning more about how such districts promoted good instruction across their systems. More specifically, we sought to address the following questions:

- How did the districts create the will to begin instructional reform?
- What strategies guided their reform efforts?
- In what ways did districts change their approaches to professional development?
- How did interactions among the stakeholders facilitate or hinder instructional reform?
- How was leadership distributed across stakeholders to facilitate improvement?

To explore these questions, we studied five school districts: the Aldine Independent School District (Texas); the Chula Vista Elementary School District (California); the Kent County Public Schools (Maryland); the Minneapolis Public Schools (Minnesota); and the Providence Public Schools (Rhode Island). We selected the districts based on their ability to exhibit at least three years of improvement in student achievement in mathematics and/or reading across multiple grades and across all races and ethnicities.

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We also sought districts that represented a cross section of characteristics, including size, region, urbanicity, and union affiliation.

Taken as a whole, the districts demonstrated improvement in achievement across grades, subjects, and racial/ethnic groups. For example, over a seven-year period, both Kent County and Aldine rose from the lower to the top tier of districts in their states. In Aldine, the achievement gap between white students and black and Hispanic students was nearly eliminated. Kent County, meanwhile, substantially increased the proportion of students scoring "satisfactory" on state tests and was the highest-scoring district in the state in 1999 and 2000. Improvements in Chula Vista, Minneapolis, and Providence were also evident in math and/or reading—particularly at the elementary grades.

While this story is largely one of improvement, a few caveats are in order. First, although the districts demonstrated improvements, not all were high achieving. Second, while not all districts exhibited each characteristic we describe, at least three districts implemented each of the strategies outlined in the coming pages. Finally, this study concentrated on district efforts to improve instruction. Many districts employed additional strategies (e.g., family support systems) that may have contributed to academic success but were beyond the scope of this study.

We do not presume that the study districts have all the answers. Stakeholders we interviewed were candid about the challenges they faced. Nonetheless, we believe this report provides valuable lessons for districts interested in improving teaching and learning across entire systems. For further information on the findings, see the complete study report, as well as individual case studies of each of the five districts. For information about ordering or downloading these documents, visit the Learning First Alliance website at www.learningfirst.org.

District Statistical Data: 2001–2002 School Year

	Aldine	Chula Vista	Kent County	Minneapolis	Providence
Per-pupil budget ($)	6,822	5,500	8,000	10,854	9,897
Number of schools	61	39	8	128	48
Number of students	52,520	23,132	2,795	47,470	27,192
Student racial/ethnic distribution (%)					
White	9	20	70	26	16
Black	34	5	27	44	22
Hispanic	55	62	3	11	52
Asian/Pacific Islander/Filipino	3	12	0	15	9
Native American/ Alaskan Native	0	1	0	4	1
Free and reduced lunch eligibility (%)	74	44	38	67	80
English as a second language (%)	23	33	1	24	22
Number of teachers (full-time equivalent)	3,496	1,122	179	3,629	2,100

Note: Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding error.

A Look at Principal Findings

Learning First Alliance leaders and researchers spent several days in each district and conducted more than 200 individual interviews, 15 school visits, and 60 focus groups. We found that districts implemented a strikingly similar set of strategies to improve instruction. Seven factors emerged as essential to improvement:

1. Districts had the courage to acknowledge poor performance and the will to seek solutions.
2. Districts put in place a systemwide approach to improving instruction—one that articulated curricular content and provided instructional supports.
3. Districts instilled visions that focused on student learning and guided instructional improvement.[1]
4. Districts made decisions based on data, not instinct.
5. Districts adopted new approaches to professional development that involved a coherent and district-organized set of strategies to improve instruction.
6. Districts redefined leadership roles.
7. Districts committed to sustaining reform over the long haul.

FINDING 1: Districts had the courage to acknowledge poor performance and the will to seek solutions.

The emergence of public reporting of testing results drove many districts to look at student achievement data in new ways, and they did not like what they saw: low achievement, particularly for poor and minority children. In each district, some combination of leaders—school board members, superintendents, and/or community members—acknowledged poor performance, accepted responsibility, and began seeking solutions.

That courage to acknowledge negative information was critical to building the will to change. Leaders noted that in the past they had assumed that their systems were effective and that all participants were doing the best they could. Today, the willingness of leaders to question practices in the public arena has spurred stakeholders at all levels to support and implement new strategies to improve teaching and learning.

Building Political Will

Leaders in the districts spurred reform by:

- Publicly acknowledging that student achievement was unacceptably low
- Accepting responsibility for the problem
- Clearly stating that all stakeholders in the system needed to be part of the solution
- Committing themselves to long-term efforts and supporting innovations even if they did not show immediate results

FINDING 2: Districts put in place a systemwide approach to improving instruction.

To improve student achievement, leaders realized they would need to fundamentally change instructional practice. Teachers would need to be more effective in helping every child succeed, and principals, central office staff, and board members would need to become more effective at supporting teachers in their classrooms.

[1] Items 3–6 are core elements of finding 2, the systemwide approach. We have chosen to highlight these findings separately because of their importance in district efforts to improve instruction.

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Before reforms began, the districts had neither clear, well-understood goals nor effective measures of progress. Supports to improve instruction were haphazard. Boards did not make instruction and achievement central to their work. Principals were more likely to focus on administrative duties than on helping teachers to improve their instruction and student outcomes. None of the districts had systemwide curricula to guide instruction. Without a common base from which to work, teachers and principals often received little guidance about instruction.

Today, much has changed. The districts have adopted systemwide approaches to improving teaching and learning. While not all components are fully designed and implemented, districts are making progress. The most common components of these new systems are:

- A vision focused on student learning and instructional improvement
- Systemwide curricula that connect to state standards, are coherent across grade levels, and provide teachers with clear expectations about what to teach
- A multimeasure accountability system and systemwide use of data to inform practice, to hold schools accountable for results, and to monitor progress
- A new approach to professional development—one that involves a coherent and district-organized set of strategies to improve instruction
- Instructional leadership distributed across stakeholders
- Strategic allocation of financial and human resources
- Use of high-quality research to inform decisionmaking and practice

Everything we do is based on what's best for the children, period.

—Aldine board member

Although the creation of an infrastructure for instructional improvement might suggest that the districts imposed top-down reforms at the expense of school-level flexibility, that does not appear to have been the case. Over time, district leaders determined that to improve instruction, schools needed to have the flexibility to hire teachers, to use funds, and to structure their staffs and time as they saw fit.

In the coming pages, we will highlight several elements of the systemwide strategy that were the most pervasive and well-developed across all districts.

FINDING 3: Districts instilled visions that focused on student learning and guided instructional improvement.

Acknowledging poor student performance provided district leaders with the ammunition to push for change. The districts began by developing visions to guide them down this path. The visions, while differing across the districts, shared four common elements:

1. Increasing achievement for all students
2. Improving instruction
3. Creating a safe and supportive environment for students
4. Involving parents and the community

What distinguished these districts was not the existence of a vision. What was notable, however, was the extent to which and the ways in which the districts used their visions to guide instructional improvement. Visions were clearly outlined in strategic plans, board meeting agendas, school improvement plans, and newsletters. Furthermore, superintendents made it clear that the vision was to drive programmatic decisions and the allocation of human and financial resources. Most districts succeeded in embedding the vision into the actions of stakeholders, particularly at the administrative level. An Aldine board member explained the use of its vision, noting: "Everything we do is based on what's best

for the children, period. Whether you are dealing with an administrative issue or a student issue, we ask, 'What's best for the children?'"

FINDING 4: Districts made decisions based on data, not instinct.

Leaders determined that in order to improve instruction, they would need to put in place systems to assess district strengths and weaknesses. As a result, the districts did three things:

1. They systematically gathered data on multiple issues, such as student and school performance, customer satisfaction, and demographic indicators.
2. They developed multimeasure accountability systems to gauge student and school progress.
3. They provided supports to assist teachers and administrators in using data.

The districts determined that to assess progress and plan instruction they needed to expand beyond standardized state testing data. Thus, they gathered an array of measures, including formative academic assessments, attendance rates, suspension rates, satisfaction ratings, and school climate surveys. Minneapolis provided the most sophisticated example of such an accountability system in our study. The district used more than 15 indicators to assess school progress. In addition to a wide array of testing measures, the Minneapolis system, Measuring Up, included such indicators as attendance rates, suspension rates, and student and staff perceptions of school safety. Schools were ranked according to their aggregate progress on all indicators. Minneapolis leaders asserted that the Measuring Up system provided them with a more accurate picture of school success than did the state ranking, which relied on a single test score.

The study districts understood that simply having good data and a multimeasure accountability system was not sufficient. To change practice, stakeholders needed to use data to make decisions about teaching and learning. To facilitate such efforts, the districts employed a number of strategies:

- *Making the data safe.* Districts actively embraced data as a tool to help them improve. While districts celebrated positive data, leaders did not shy away from difficult information. They modeled acceptance of difficult data by pushing stakeholders to seek solutions rather than placing blame.
- *Making the data usable.* Districts also sought to provide school leaders with data that were easy to access and understand. Some districts supplied teachers and principals with interpreted data reports. Others funded teacher leaders to help interpret school-specific data. Still others provided technology to facilitate in-school disaggregation of data. Such tools allowed teachers and principals to get answers about trends within schools and to determine gaps in learning across certain groups of students.
- *Making use of the data.* Several districts did not simply provide data but also trained principals and teachers to use them. A Kent County teacher explained the value of training, noting: "Assessment training has empowered teachers to feel that you can look at the assessments and control the results in your classroom. You are not at the mercy of a mysterious force."

Principals, board members, teachers, and central office staff in all districts exhibited significant use of data to guide decisionmaking. The statement of a Providence administrator was reflective of stakeholders throughout the districts: "Our decisions are made based on data, qualitative and quantitative. We look at student achievement and other data on an ongoing basis.... We use data all the time."

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FINDING 5: Districts adopted new approaches to professional development.

The districts made remarkable shifts in their approaches to professional development. To varying degrees, all districts moved beyond the traditional one-time workshop approach and put in place coherent, district-organized strategies to improve instruction (see table on page 7). The strategies included the following:

- *Principles for professional development.* Districts used research-based principles of professional development to guide their work. They connected teacher and principal professional development to district goals and student needs, based the content of professional development on needs that emerged from data, and implemented multiple strategies to foster continuous learning.
- *Networks of instructional experts.* Districts sought to augment instructional leadership by building well-trained cadres of instructional experts among the teacher and principal corps. Principals were not expected to lead alone, and teachers were not expected to work in isolation. By fostering networks of instructionally proficient principals and teacher leaders (e.g., content specialists, mentor teachers), districts increased their capacity to improve instructional practice.
- *Support systems for new teachers.* Districts implemented multiple strategies, particularly mentoring programs, to assist novice teachers.
- *Strategic allocation of financial resources.* Districts invested financially in their goals of improving instruction and achievement. Before allocating their dollars, school boards, superintendents, and principals looked carefully at how to stretch and prioritize their funds to address instructional needs.
- *Encouragement and assistance in using data.* Districts provided teachers and principals with better data—and with more assistance on how to use data to guide instructional practice.

These supports resulted in new approaches to professional development. For example, districts altered the structure of district-level professional development days. Today, districts carefully design their professional development days over the course of a year to focus on the most important needs that emerge from the data. Furthermore, most districts have shifted a majority of training days away from district control and back to their schools as a way to increase in-school professional development. A Kent County administrator noted: "Professional development must be comprehensive, not just the feel-good flavor of the month. We have pushed to get away from something different every day. We look to address issues in depth."

Changes in practice also emerged at the school level. In many schools, teachers and principals felt empowered to tackle challenges together and felt a professional responsibility to seek and share ways to improve instruction. Furthermore, each district produced examples of schools that had created staffing and scheduling structures so that teachers could work together effectively to address instructional challenges. School-level stakeholders also exhibited significant use of data to guide instructional decisionmaking. While challenges remain, the districts have made significant shifts in their approach to professional development. As a Kent County teacher explained, "We are beginning to work smarter. We are doing individual assessments and are identifying students' needs and tailoring instruction."

Professional development must be comprehensive, not just the feel-good flavor of the month.

—Kent County administrator

New Strategies for Improving Instruction: Professional Development Characteristics before and after Instructional Reform

Before Instructional Reform	After Instructional Reform
Districts did not provide a systemwide framework to support good instruction.	**Districts implemented a framework to support instructional improvement.** Common elements included: ▪ A vision focused on student learning and instructional improvement ▪ Systemwide curricula that connected to state standards and were coherent across grade levels ▪ A multimeasure accountability system and systemwide use of data ▪ A new approach to professional development—one that involved a coherent set of strategies to improve instruction ▪ Instructional leadership distributed across stakeholders ▪ Strategic allocation of financial and human resources ▪ Use of high-quality research to inform decisionmaking and practice
Districts lacked a set of research-based principles to guide professional development efforts.	**Districts and schools used research-based principles to guide professional development implementation.**
Little connection existed between district goals and school-based professional development.	**Significant connections existed between district visions and school strategies to improve instruction.**
Instructional leadership was diffuse, and leaders were not trained in a coordinated way. ▪ There was limited support for principals to become instructional leaders. ▪ Teacher leaders existed but were not used in a coordinated, explicit manner.	**Districts created networks of instructional leaders that provided significant support to teachers.** ▪ Districts expected principals to be instructional leaders and provided significant support. ▪ Districts formed networks of teacher leaders who provided instructional assistance to teachers, principals, and central office administrators.
Data were not widely used to inform instructional and professional development decisions.	**Professional development decisions at the school and district levels were based on needs that emerged from data.**
Professional development at the district level was ad hoc.	**Districts modeled research-based professional development.** Districts incorporated the criteria of goal-focused, ongoing, data-driven professional development by: ▪ Ensuring that districtwide professional development days had a year-long focus and were connected to district goals ▪ Shifting districtwide professional development days to the school level ▪ Promoting action research among stakeholders
Resources were not used in a targeted way to leverage instructional improvement.	**Districts strategically used internal and external resources to improve instruction.** Districts used data and their visions strategically to target the allocation of resources to improve instruction.

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FINDING 6: Districts redefined leadership roles.

District leaders determined that no single stakeholder could tackle instructional improvement alone. The expansion of instructional leadership did not occur overnight. But during the course of the reforms, the districts extended the leadership from traditional positions—the superintendent and principal—to include other actors: assistant principals, teacher leaders, central office staff, union leaders, and school board members. In addition, in most districts external actors—representatives from state offices, universities, and communities—worked in a coordinated manner with district staff. In these districts, leadership was not simply shared; most stakeholder groups sought to take on the elements of reform that they were best positioned to lead.

- *School boards shepherded instructional improvement efforts.* In many districts, the school board jump-started reform efforts. Boards did not simply galvanize change; they followed through by promulgating policies that supported instructional improvement (e.g., higher salaries for teachers and principals, mentoring programs for new teachers, and systemwide curricula). In most districts, the boards held the superintendent and staff accountable for progress but did not engage in daily administration. As a Chula Vista board member explained, "I am not an administrator; that is not my job....[The superintendent and her staff] are the professionals, and we say to them, 'These are the results we want to see; you are in charge of how to do it.'"
- *Central offices drove systemwide change.* In each district, the superintendent transformed central office policies, structures, and human resources into forces that guided improvement. More specifically, central offices assumed roles that they were uniquely situated to fulfill—responsibilities that, if not taken up by districts, would have been left unperformed or highly fragmented. Examples of such practices included establishing systems to improve principal leadership, coordinating curriculum alignment, establishing and implementing a multimeasure accountability system, and creating systemwide supports for new teachers.
- *Principals and teacher leaders were crucial to the districts' systems of instructional leadership.* Nowhere was the district commitment to building instructional expertise more evident than in the development of principals and teacher leaders. Districts made instructional leadership the primary element of each principal's work and offered support in multiple ways. All districts regularly convened principals to share challenges, exchange strategies, and learn about emerging issues. Districts also provided significant training in instructional leadership techniques. Today, principals regularly engage in classroom observation, use data to analyze student performance and teaching strategies, and seek to build structures that encourage collaboration.

  To expand instructional leadership, districts also relied on teacher leaders. These leaders provided additional instructional support to teachers by modeling lessons, providing one-on-one coaching, and assisting struggling teachers. Furthermore, they often relieved principals of administrative instructional duties such as professional development planning and overseeing testing administration. Teacher leaders also deepened the coherence of instructional practice across schools within the study districts. Districts frequently convened teacher leaders for professional development and information sharing. As a result, these leaders became intimately engaged in districtwide strategies and were able to share those

strategies in their work with teachers. Such actions also increased the input of teachers into designing systemwide instructional practices.

The expansion of leadership required significant collaboration among stakeholders. Simply getting along was not the goal; leaders determined that amity held little value if it did not create positive change for children. Led by the efforts of their boards and superintendents, the most collaborative districts in the study *worked on working together*. Cross-role leadership structures facilitated communication, and districts deliberately sought tools to improve collaboration.

FINDING 7: Districts committed to sustaining reform over the long haul.

These districts showed that making a difference takes time. They established strategies for improvement and stayed with their plans for years. One indicator of that commitment was the remarkably high level of stability among top-level leadership. In three of the five districts, the superintendents who sparked change served their districts for at least eight years. And most districts had a core number of board members who served for 10 or more years. In Chula Vista, for example, three of the five board members who hired Libby Gil as superintendent in 1993 remained on the board almost consecutively for eight years of her nine-year tenure. Similar consistency was evident in Aldine and Kent County. Such continuity of leadership allowed superintendents and boards to understand each other's work and to grow together in their approaches to change.

The districts also paid attention to leadership succession and thus to the stability of new practices--particularly at the central office level. In four of the five districts, the superintendents left their positions during the course of the study and, in each case, were replaced by their deputies. The original superintendents had served to shake up district practice. After their departure, the school boards sought to sustain the reforms through continued stability in leadership.

Challenges to Systemwide Instructional Improvement

Although the districts in the study have made significant strides toward their goals, they still face considerable challenges. We outline three key challenges below.

Old system structures do not easily support new approaches to professional development. Our interviews suggested that the study districts expected more out of their teachers and principals than they ever had before. District leaders expected school staff to take on multiple roles: to analyze data and to diagnose student needs, to determine the efficacy of their own practices, to align their instruction to standards, to research new practices, and to collaborate frequently with colleagues. Yet district leaders had not created the full complement of supports needed for teachers to meet these new expectations.

We saw clear attempts on the part of many teachers and principals to live up to these expectations. Yet the challenges were enormous. While many schools increased the amount of collaborative time available, carving out an hour or two a week for reflection, only a limited number significantly overhauled the school day. As a result, in many schools, the staffing structures and time allocations provided insufficient opportunity for daily collaboration. Teachers, while desiring to meet new expectations, felt overwhelmed by the additional demands.

High schools struggle to improve achievement. Improved student achievement was primarily confined to elementary schools in the study districts. This is perhaps not surprising, as the

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districts focused heavily, and in most cases deliberately, on instructional improvement in the elementary grades (and to some degree the middle grades) almost to the exclusion of the high schools. As districts began to experience increases in achievement in the elementary grades, they turned greater attention to high schools. However, improvement at the middle and high school levels remains a challenge.

Finding funding to support new approaches to instructional improvement remains difficult. To engage in strategies to improve instruction, the districts relied significantly on external state, federal, and private grants. Providence, for example, received multi-million-dollar grants from private foundations to help train principals and teacher leaders. In Chula Vista, a three-year grant from the state allowed the district to hire a math instructional specialist to train teachers in math content and pedagogy. While external resources provided districts with a powerful boost to their professional development efforts, these resources were a double-edged sword. On the one hand, without such resources the districts would have been unable to provide many of the professional growth opportunities that currently drive their reform efforts. On the other hand, the heavy reliance on such funds presented constraints. Obtaining such resources created a significant drain on human labor in some of the districts. And reliance on short-term grants to fuel instructional reform often created difficulties in sustaining new efforts.

Ten Lessons Learned

At a time when districts nationwide face enormous pressure to raise achievement for all students, particularly those who have traditionally lagged behind their peers, educators and policymakers are eager for ideas. The work of the five districts in this study offers 10 important lessons for those seeking to improve instruction and student achievement.

LESSON 1: *Districts can make a difference.* If as a nation we are serious about improving achievement for all students, we cannot expect the staff of each of the nation's approximately 95,000 public schools to figure out how to do this work on their own. As these five districts demonstrate, school districts play an essential role in providing a coherent instructional framework to help schools, particularly low-performing schools, succeed.

LESSON 2: *Let truth be heard.* These districts created a climate for change where it was safe to acknowledge poor performance and safe to seek solutions. Leaders neither made excuses for poor achievement nor wasted time placing blame. Rather, they accepted the challenge of educating all children and made sure that superintendents, principals, and other leaders shared this goal.

LESSON 3: *Focus on instruction to improve student achievement.* It is basic: students learn what they are taught; students will learn more if they are taught well. Yet so often reform efforts look at everything except how to help teachers help their students learn. In these districts, reforms focused on improving instruction, and this approach is paying off.

LESSON 4: *Improving instruction requires a coherent, systemwide approach.* To help all schools improve achievement, district leaders created a framework of supports. They established a clear vision, set outcome goals, created districtwide curricula, and put forward a set of strategies to support better instruction.

LESSON 5: *Make decisions based on good data.* Data were at the core of decisionmaking throughout the districts. These districts used multiple—not single—measures of student and school performance to gauge progress and inform instruction.

Our decisions are made based on data, qualitative and quantitative...We use data all the time.

—Providence administrator

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LESSON 6: *Rethink professional development.* These districts abolished traditional and ineffective approaches to teacher training and replaced them with research-based strategies to improve teacher and principal skills. They used student performance data to guide what teachers needed to learn and created cadres of principals and teacher leaders to provide quality instructional guidance.

LESSON 7: *Everyone has a role to play in improving instruction.* No single stakeholder was expected to lead instructional reform. Leadership was shared across the system, and stakeholders generally took on the leadership roles for which they were best suited.

LESSON 8: *Working together takes work.* The expansion of leadership required significant collaboration among stakeholders. The most collaborative districts in the study worked on working together.

LESSON 9: *There are no quick fixes.* Leaders in these districts recognized that success would take time and that they would have to stick with their efforts for the long haul. District leaders encouraged practitioners to try new ideas and did not expect immediate results. Board leaders supported superintendents over many years and many initiatives. Leaders assessed the impact of their efforts and made adjustments along the route.

LESSON 10: *Current structures and funding limit success.* Current district and school structures do not fully provide the time and supports necessary for systemwide instructional improvement. Moreover, these districts' heavy reliance on external and short-term funding to support their efforts puts their continued success in jeopardy—and raises questions about how many other districts can follow in their path.

Although some may seem commonsensical, these lessons are important because they are not being applied systemically in our nation. As these districts illustrate, when these lessons are applied, improvement in high-poverty school systems is possible. These districts earned their good results. While the districts have not figured out all the answers, they show that when districts support schools and plan carefully and collaboratively, they can translate their visions into improvement—for their communities, their leaders, their teachers, their parents, and, most important, their students.

For the Learning First Alliance, these lessons are not academic. They lead to an action agenda for the future. On the basis of these lessons, the Learning First Alliance has adopted a set of recommendations directed to all those involved in improving our nation's public schools.

Taking Action

1. **Mobilize political will to improve instruction across the district; engage everyone for the long haul.**
   - A. Use student achievement data to galvanize political will.
   - B. Recognize that improving instruction is essential; create top-level support for instruction among board members, superintendents, and community and parent leaders.
   - C. Allow for innovation that may not show immediate results.

2. **Implement a systemwide approach to improving instruction that specifies the outcomes to be expected, the content to be taught, the data to inform the work, and the supports to be provided.**
   - A. Develop a clear and concrete vision for improving instruction districtwide, and use it to guide decisionmaking at all levels of the system.
   - B. Provide curricular guidance to help teachers know what to teach.
   - C. Use data to assess needs, guide decisionmaking, and measure improvement.
     - Create multimeasure accountability systems that specify desired student and school outcomes.
     - Provide usable data to stakeholders.
     - Train stakeholders to use data effectively.
   - D. Make professional development relevant and useful.
   - E. Align human, financial, and other resources with instructional priorities.
   - F. Be a savvy and active consumer of the best available research and expertise.

3. **Make professional development relevant and useful.**
   - A. Agree on and use research-based principles to guide professional development.
   - B. Eliminate inefficient single-workshop approaches to professional development.
   - C. Create a robust corps of teachers and principals who are instructional leaders.
   - D. Use data and research to guide professional development content.
   - E. Create support systems for new teachers.

4. **Redefine school and district leadership roles.**
   - A. Work together to ensure that stakeholders—boards, central offices, unions, principals, teachers and teacher leaders, universities, and parent and community leaders—are engaging in the roles that they are best positioned to lead.
   - B. Build a network of instructional expertise, including a strong corps of principals and teachers as instructional leaders.
   - C. Focus the central office on developing a systemwide framework to support instruction.
   - D. Within a clearly defined district framework, allow schools the flexibility to make decisions based on data and to allocate resources as needed to address goals and challenges.

5. **Explore ways to restructure the traditional school day and year.**

   Provide adequate time and supports for teachers and principals to carry out the new vision for their work and instructional improvement.

6. **Attend to funding.**

   Make funding for new approaches to professional development central to district budgets, and call for dependable state and federal funding for this essential work.

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Recommendations for Individual Stakeholders

The recommendations on page 12 have important implications for everyone with a stake in improving instruction and achievement. Doing the hard work of districtwide improvement requires all stakeholders to step forward and lead where they are best positioned to lead. As a beginning step, the Alliance urges stakeholders to consider the following:

School Boards

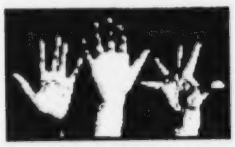
1. Maintain the district focus on improving instruction and achievement.
2. Work collaboratively with the central office, union, and other leaders (1) to frame and implement a district vision focused on instruction and achievement and (2) to adopt and use research-based principles regarding effective teaching and effective professional development.
3. Use data to regularly monitor the efficacy of the school system. Hold yourselves and the central office responsible for results. When results are disappointing, seek solutions rather than assigning blame.
4. Hire top-level leaders—a superintendent and deputy superintendent—who will lead instructional improvement and will make decisions based on instructional and academic needs.
5. Set clear, coherent policies that support better instruction. Avoid involvement in day-to-day decisionmaking that constrains the operation of the district.
6. Recognize that improving instruction and student achievement is an ongoing process. Allow for innovation that may not show immediate results.

Superintendents/Central Office

1. Work collaboratively with the board, union, and other leaders (1) to frame and implement a district vision focused on instruction and achievement and (2) to adopt and use research-based principles regarding effective teaching and effective professional development.
2. Help to ensure adequate resources for district needs.
3. Make improving instruction and achievement the guide for decisionmaking and budgeting.
4. Inspire and encourage leadership at all levels of the system. Collaborate with leaders across the district. Meet regularly with union leaders to address concerns and instructional issues. Create structures that bring together principals from across the district to collaborate regularly on improving instruction.
5. Take a systems approach to improving instruction and achievement, and align core system components to support one another.
   - Provide clear curricular guidance to help teachers know what to teach.
   - Expect principals to be instructional leaders, and provide significant training and support to help them reach that ideal.
   - Foster networks of teacher leaders at the district and school levels who provide instructional assistance to other teachers and leaders.
   - Use research-based principles to guide professional development.
6. Assess the needs of teachers in the district using teacher survey data, attrition rates, achievement data, and other information. Propose and collaborate on strategies that address these needs, such as induction programs, provision of differentiated professional development for veteran teachers, and development of teacher leaders.

Union Leaders

1. Work collaboratively with the central office, board, and other leaders (1) to frame and implement a district vision focused on instruction and achievement and (2) to adopt and use research-based principles regarding effective teaching and effective professional development.
2. Advocate for a system of teacher leaders that can provide needed supports to classroom teachers.
3. Assess the needs of teachers in the district using teacher survey data, attrition rates, achievement data, and other information. Propose and collaborate on strategies that address these needs, such as induction



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programs, provision of differentiated professional development for veteran teachers, and development of teacher leaders.

4. Negotiate for contracts that support high-quality professional development, such as building career ladders for teacher leaders and creating strong induction programs.

Principals

1. Continually improve your skills in using data, observing instructional practice, providing instructional feedback, motivating teachers, and so forth. Work with colleagues to advocate for greater district-level supports and training.
2. Foster professional learning communities so that teachers work and learn together as part of their regular practice. Encourage teachers to engage in research-based professional development.
3. Use your resources to create teacher leader positions and employ teacher leaders to extend instructional support in the school. Advocate for central office support for teacher leaders through district funds and contracts.
4. Make improving instruction and achievement the guide for decisionmaking and budgeting.
5. Support new teachers and act as a champion at the school and district levels for effective induction practices.

Parent Leaders

1. Demand data regarding student performance, curriculum quality, teacher qualifications, the quality of instruction, fund allocation, and strategies to improve achievement.
2. Build parent and community support for instructional reform. Help parents understand reform in the district, the importance of instruction, and the relationship between instructional improvement and student achievement.
3. Learn about why teachers need ongoing on-the-job professional development to improve student achievement, and work with parents to support it. Support policies such as early-release time or additional funds to build the instructional skills of teachers and leaders.
4. Actively support school board candidates who will sustain the district focus on improving achievement and instruction.

Universities

1. Aggressively pursue opportunities to be an effective long-term partner in the design, development, implementation, and evaluation of the district's professional development plan.
2. Ensure that teacher candidates are prepared to teach in high-poverty school districts. Candidates should receive the training they need to use data effectively, to work successfully with parents and peers, to meet the learning needs of diverse students, and to teach in standards-based and assessment-driven schools.
3. Ensure that aspiring administrators are prepared to design and implement research-based, systemwide approaches to improve instruction.
4. Revise promotion and tenure policies to support effective district partnerships.

State Departments and State Boards of Education

1. Recognize and support the pivotal role that districts play in creating success across all schools. Ensure that state policies do not circumvent the district. Engage district leaders in developing and implementing state policies and programs. Deliver technical training on a districtwide scale instead of focusing on individual schools.
2. Support district efforts to align standards, assessment, curriculum, and professional development.
3. Support instructional leadership and high-quality professional development across school systems. Allocate the time, policy supports, and funding to support research-based professional development.
4. Encourage districts to use multiple data measures to gauge student success. Model the use of multiple measures for decisionmaking at the state level.
5. Provide student performance and other data to districts in a manner that allows districts to use them effectively for instructional improvement. Work closely with districts to determine how they use data and how better to respond to their needs.
6. Help build district capacity and expand leaders' opportunities to learn from each other. Highlight improving districts and the lessons that can be learned from them. Bring district leaders together to share ideas.

Next Steps for the Learning First Alliance

To ensure that the implications of this report and our recommendations are understood and implemented, the Learning First Alliance and its members will undertake the following actions:

1. Disseminate the findings and recommendations of this report broadly to educators, policymakers, parents, and the public.
2. Consider the implications of the report for each organization's work and policies.
3. Encourage school districts and states to use the report for learning, reflection, and action. To accomplish this, the Learning First Alliance will share the findings and recommendations with superintendents, school board members, principals, union leaders, parent leaders, university deans of education, chief state school officers, governors, and state school board members. We will develop tools to assist stakeholders in considering the implications of this report. In addition, we will collaborate with interested Learning First Alliance partner states to convene state policy roundtables for this purpose.
4. Build greater understanding of new approaches to professional development and address the ways that stakeholders will have to work differently to improve instruction. As part of this effort, we will identify the implications of this report for specific stakeholders, such as principals, board members, colleges of education, and state policymakers.
5. Address key challenges identified in the report:
   - Advocate at the federal, state, and local levels for sustainable funding to create coherent systems of instructional supports such as those identified in this study.
   - Examine in greater depth the challenges created by attempting to carry out new professional development practices within the current school structures. Acknowledge and address the fact that current practice does not provide adequate opportunity for teachers and principals to carry out the new demands of their work—to analyze data and diagnose student needs, to determine the efficacy of their own practice, to align their instruction to new curriculum standards, and to collaborate regularly with peers.
6. Synthesize existing research on districtwide reform to make such information accessible to practitioners and policymakers.
7. Call for high-quality research to answer important questions that practitioners and policymakers wrestle with as they seek districtwide success.

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Acknowledgments

Space unfortunately does not permit the Alliance to thank by name the many staff members of our study districts or to outline the depth of their contributions. Many staff members in each district gave generously of their time and expertise. We offer deep appreciation to Wanda Bamberg and Nadine Kujawa of Aldine Independent School District; to Jon Baker, Lorraine Costella, and Bonnie Ward of the Kent County Public Schools; to Lowell Billings, Dennis Doyle, and Libby Gil of Chula Vista Elementary School District; to Ginny Craig, Carol Johnson, and Rick Spicuzza of the Minneapolis Public Schools; and to Melody Johnson, Diana Lam, and Mike Sorum of the Providence Public Schools.

Many people from the research and policy community generously and voluntarily gave of their time and expertise. We thank Kermit Buckner, Gordon Cawelti, Tom Corcoran, Betty Hale, Rick Hess, Stephanie Hirsh, Ellen Foley, Susan Fuhrman, Willis Hawley, Susan Moore Johnson, Dale Kalkofen, Bruce King, Michael Knapp, Diane Massell, Lauren Resnick, Linda Skrla, Sam Stringfield, Gary Sykes, and Michael Usdan. We also thank the members of the Learning First State Alliances who contributed their time and suggestions to this study.

This study would not have been possible without the guidance and hard work of the International Centre for Educational Change at the University of Toronto's Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE). We are deeply grateful to the OISE research team: Stephen Anderson, who helped shepherd this study from infancy to completion, and Shawn Moore and Nancy Watson, who provided extensive guidance. We also thank Nina Bascia, Amanda Datnow, and Andy Hargreaves of the University of Toronto for their important contributions to this report.

This study represents several years of work by many people affiliated with the Learning First Alliance. We thank staff members of Alliance organizations who contributed to the research design, data gathering, and drafting of this report, including Diane Airhart, Michael Allen, Agnes Crawford, Gail Dickson, Richard Flanary, Twanna Hill, Julia Lara, John Mitchell, Joyce Munro, Virginia Roach, Marilyn Schlief, Sylvia Seidel, Joan Snowden, Irina Terehoff, Adria Thomas, and Ann R. Walker. We would also like to thank several board members from Alliance organizations, including Mary Barter, Darrell Rud, and Mossi White. We are especially grateful to Gene Carter, Tony Rollins, Judy Seltz, and Mikki Terry for their guidance and support.

We wish to thank members of the Learning First Alliance staff and the team of editors. We offer our deepest gratitude to Ann Walker, whose perseverance contributed immeasurably to the completion of this study. The careful editing of Anne Edwards, Pat George, and Bob Rothman contributed significantly to creating what we hope is a clear and engaging report. We thank Cathy Horn for her thorough review of the achievement data. We also extend appreciation to Abby Emerson, Adrienne Gault, Marissa Hopkins, Lisa Lazarus, and Jennifer Oliva for their important contributions to the project and its completion.

Finally, we are grateful to the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Research & Improvement and the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation.

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1. Ensure that high academic expectations are held for all students
2. Ensure a safe and supportive place of learning for all students
3. Engage parents and other community members in helping students achieve high academic expectations

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Council of Chief State School Officers
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